STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN CHARTER SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY TO INFORM POLICY AND PRACTICE

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To my parents, *Ernest Gregory Kulwicki* and *Margie Jean Kulwicki*, who never let me settle for anything but my best.

To my older brothers, *Chris* (who we all miss dearly), *Dale*, and *Steve*, who have always served as my models for integrity, honesty, and the importance of family.

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Bruce Kulwicki

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN CHARTER SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY TO INFORM POLICY AND PRACTICE

In this case study, I conducted an in-depth examination of a Midwest Montessori Charter School's ability to serve students with disabilities (SWDs). I studied whether the administrators, staff, parents, and students believed the school could serve SWDs in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). I investigated how the school's unique mission and curricular design enhanced or inhibited efforts to meet the needs of SWDs. I also studied what training, resources, and expertise the participants perceived was needed to effectively serve SWDs in the charter school setting. I interviewed students with disabilities, parents of students with disabilities, and school staff to answer my research questions. The parents and students had prior experience with special education services at regular public schools before enrolling in the charter school. Each reported being more satisfied with their educational experience at the charter school than at their former regular public school. School staff members perceived their special education services as compliant with the federal law that protects the rights of students with disabilities in public schools. My interview data were supported by observations in multiple settings and a review of school data from the state database and the school's website. After analyzing the data, several themes emerged: 1.) Special education services at the school were perceived as adequate, and in some cases superior, to those offered in regular public schools; 2.) There was a lack of urgency regarding student performance on state mandated, accountability-driven testing; 3.) The school prioritized community and communication to foster student success; 4.) The school was not readily prepared to serve

students with severe cognitive and/or physical disabilities; and 5.) The charter school stakeholders valued and implemented a full inclusion model to serve their SWDs. In the final chapter, I discuss the implications of my study for legislators, regular public and charter school practitioners and parents.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The National Alliance of Charter Schools describes charter schools as unique public schools that are allowed the freedom to be more innovative while being held accountable for advancing student achievement (http://www.publiccharters.org/, 2016). As public schools, it is important that these innovative schools are inclusive of students with disabilities (SWDs) and follow all federal laws pertaining to their education.

My study examines the perceptions of parents, students, and school staff regarding the special education services at one charter school. The research questions for my study were developed from a review of the relevant literature found in Chapter Two. These research questions are detailed in Chapter Three, along with a discussion of my research methods. Chapter Four addresses the findings of my research and Chapter Five is a discussion of those findings. Chapter Five also includes my study's implications for legislators, charter school practitioners, regular public schools and parents.

This introductory chapter will include a statement of the problem of whether charter schools are sufficiently serving the needs of SWDs and some of the political and legal influences that add significance to the issue. Then, I share the purpose of my study, my research questions, and my study's significance. Last, I share how my position as one who has worked in the field of special education in the regular public school setting for over two decades has influenced my desire to engage in this research.

Problem Statement

As the school choice movement continues to influence the educational landscape, it will be important to monitor what impact it has on students with disabilities (SWDs). Charter schools are free from rules and regulations, but only if they improve student academic outcomes,

typically determined by a combination of student performance on standardized tests and graduation rates (Garda, 2012). It is possible that charter school operators would prefer to have students who perform at a high level academically populating their classrooms. Students who do not perform well academically due to a disability might struggle in a charter school setting. For this reason, SWDs may be intentionally or unintentionally excluded from attending charter schools (Fierros & Blomberg, 2005).

This potential exclusion of SWDs at charter schools runs counter with the long history of inclusion of SWDs in public schools and the major pieces of legislation that have followed. Legal challenges from regular public schools, parents and advocates can be expected if charter schools are perceived as exclusive or remiss in adequately meeting the needs of all students. But as Garda (2012) notes, the charter movement is founded on allowing schools greater autonomy in exchange for educational results. Charter schools are judged by the performance of their students, not adherence to mandatory processes, such as those required when educating SWDs. As stated by President Clinton, an early misconception was that charter schools were "schools that have no rules" (p. 2). But in spite of a charter school's mission, and despite state deregulation, they are subject to all mandates of the federal laws relevant to SWDs including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (Estes, 2003). To better illuminate the tensions between the deregulatory nature of charter schools and the highly regulated foundations of educating SWDs, further research is necessary. As will be discussed in Chapter Two, gaps exist in the research about special education and charter schools. Specifically, only one case study, Drame and Frattura (2011), was found in the peer-reviewed literature. This is why I chose a case study approach to examine special education services at a charter school.

Background on the Problem

According to Ravitch (2010), the national charter school movement gained legitimacy through the politics of accountability and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, which was reauthorized in 2016 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Criticism of regular public schools was central to the movement. Public schools were described as failing to produce high levels of student achievement as measured by standardized tests. This failure was particularly noted among identified subgroups divided by race, limited English proficiency, migrant status, socioeconomic status, and disability status. Critics of regular public schools suggested that the cause of this lack of achievement was mainly ineffective teaching. In a particularly damning article in Newsweek, titled *Why We Must Fire Bad Teachers,* the performance of public schools was described as a "national embarrassment and a threat to the future of America" (Thomas & Wingert, 2010, p. 1).

On a national scale, school reformers were “committed to free-market principles, competition, and sought to replace big-city public school systems with a marketplace of choices, featuring privately managed charter schools, and to break free of union contracts” (Ravitch, p. 249). Proponents of charter schools believed that freedom from regulation and bureaucracy coupled with a specific mission would lead to higher student achievement (Shealey, Thomas & Sparks, 2012). Further, the development of charter schools was specifically mentioned in NCLB. When regular public schools consistently fail to make adequate yearly progress as defined by the Act, NCLB identifies the conversion to charter status as one of multiple sanction choices (Rhim, Ahearn, & Lange, 2007).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of my study was to reveal the perceptions of various stakeholders regarding how the needs of SWDs are being met at one charter school. I was particularly interested in identifying what participants felt was their obligation and capacity to meet the needs of SWDs in their unique setting. Although there is research on charter schools serving SWDS on topics such as equitable enrollment practices and the knowledge base of charter school personnel regarding special education law, very few studies have drilled down and examined the individual perceptions of school stakeholders. To address this gap in the literature, I decided to engage in a case study of one charter school. I used interviews of parents, students and school staff to address three main research questions: 1.) What are the perceptions of a charter school's administrators, staff, parents, and students regarding their school's abilities to serve SWDs in compliance with the main principles of IDEA?; 2.) In what ways do the school's mission, curricular design, and physical structure enhance or inhibit efforts to meet the needs of SWDs? ; 3.) What training, resources, and expertise do the study participants perceive as needed to effectively serve SWDs in the charter school setting?

Interviews were the primary means used to answer the research questions. To support my interview data, I also engaged in formal and informal observations and reviewed school data gleaned from websites of the school and the state department of education. My research findings were organized into the following themes: 1.) Stakeholder confidence in services for SWDs; 2.) De-emphasis of state mandated testing; 3.) Prioritization of community and communication; 4.) Current inability to serve students with significant disabilities; and 5.) Full inclusion model.

Significance of Study

My research addressed some of the gaps in the literature, particularly how a charter school's mission and curricular focus impacts the services of SWDs *and* the perceptions of

school stakeholders about the quality of the services. My findings are important in that they can provide guidance to legislators as they create and/or revise charter school policy. At the local level, my study may be used to improve staff training, parent/school relations, and services for SWDs in both charter *and* regular public schools. My study could lead parents of SWDs to ask good questions about placement and service options for their child prior to enrolling in a charter school. Finally, future researchers in the field of public education may benefit from my study. They may wish to further explore which types of charter schools most seamlessly align with laws and rules that govern the education of SWDs, and those that do not.

Positionality Statement

According to Throne (2016), it is important for a researcher to fully self-identify their place, or position, within a field or discipline, "to define a clear viewpoint in drawing conclusions and implications from the results of any inquiry" (p. 1). Before engaging in my research I considered several factors about my own position, history, and subjectivity that could impact my study.

I am an advocate for individuals with disabilities and have spent my entire professional life working on their behalf. I earned a bachelor's degree in social work in 1988. My practicum experience included working with adults with significant cognitive disabilities at a state agency. Shortly after graduating with my degree in social work, I took a temporary special education teaching job in Southern Indiana. My teaching assignment was a self-contained special education classroom for students with emotional/behavioral disabilities. I found teaching special education so rewarding that I ended up earning my teaching credentials and remained a special education teacher for nearly two decades. During my time in the classroom I assisted with the school district's movement away from the self-contained environment for special education students to

an inclusion model. I considered this movement to inclusion as highly progressive and a profound improvement for SWDs in terms of equity and educational quality.

After being in the classroom for 18 years, I entered special education administration. For ten years I was the Director of Exceptional Learners for the school corporation that had given me my first opportunity as a teacher. I managed programs for special education students, high ability students, English language learners, and alternative education students. For the last three years I have been the Director of Exceptional Learners for a county-wide cooperative that oversees special education programs for three separate school districts. The cooperative serves around 1100 students with a wide range of disabilities and needs. My role as director involves providing support to school administrators, teachers and staff in implementing best practices for serving SWDs. However, my work also includes ensuring that school administrators, teachers and support staff serve SWDs with dignity and equity. I am also responsible for ensuring that all state and federal laws for educating SWDs are followed, and making the needed corrections when they are not.

As a result of my career experiences, I have developed certain perspectives on what equitable treatment of, and best practices for SWDs, *looks like* in the school setting. I believe all school staff members should be knowledgeable about special education rules and laws. Also, SWDs should be educated with non-disabled peers to the fullest extent possible. Such inclusive practice benefits *all* students. Most importantly, SWDs have a right to be held to high expectations for learning, but need support to access the general education curriculum. As I engaged in my study, I found that the environment was inclusive of SWDs, and the expectations for their learning were high, but I did have some concerns about the level of special education support that they were offered. This was mainly due to my own experiences working in special

education. As a special education teacher, I was specifically licensed to serve SWDs and provided them with direct instruction. In my role as a special education administrator, we recruit and retain special education teachers to provide specialized instruction to students who are eligible for special education services. Therefore, some of my observations at the charter school ran counter to my training and experience. The school staff at my study site provided services to SWDs without much direct support from special education teachers. This model made me question whether or not the SWDs at the school were being adequately served. For this reason, I committed to being open minded with regard to a different, innovative approach to meeting the needs of SWDs that was different from that which I was familiar. As I reviewed interview transcripts and field notes, I noted when I sensed that *my* experiences as a special educator were influencing how I felt about the services being provided at the study site. I found it particularly hard to believe that all the special education students in the building (over 100) could be adequately served by only one licensed special education staff member. I thought about my days as a special education teacher and what I did to support the students under my care. For the most part, I provided support for SWDs because the regular public education model at the time did not meet their individual needs. It is possible that if a school aligns it's curriculum to the individual needs of learners, fewer additional (special education) supports would be needed. This is at least one way that my past experiences clouded my perspective on the school's ability to support SWDs.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter is organized into six sections. The first section is an explanation of what charter schools are and how they differ from regular public schools. The second section gives information about the federal laws that are in place to protect the rights of SWDs and how charter schools put themselves at risk when they fail to follow them (Decker, Plucker, & Eckes, 2010; Decker, Seitz, & Kulwicki, 2015; Garda, 2012; McKinney & Mead, 1996; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2001).The third section is a discussion of the problems SWDs experience in charter schools that emerged from a review of the relevant literature. One problem is the underrepresentation of SWDs enrolled in charter schools when compared to regular public schools (Fierros & Blomberg, 2005; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012; Wolf, 2010). Another issue is how charter schools struggle to adequately meet the needs of SWDs due to lack of knowledge and/or resources (Drame, 2011; Drame & Frattura, 2011; Estes, 2008; Fiore, Harwell, Blackorby, & Finnegan, 2000). In the fourth section I discuss some solutions to the problems SWDs face in charter schools and efforts to improve outcomes for SWDs in charter schools. Partnerships with outside entities help charter schools stay in compliance with laws for serving SWDs (Drame, 2011; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2001). Also, there are a growing number of organizations designed to assist charter schools engage in best practices for serving SWDs. One such organization is the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (www.ncses.org). The final two sections include the implications and significance of my study as well as some of the assumptions that developed as I engaged in the literature review.

I. Charter Schools

The National Alliance of Charter Schools describes charter schools as unique public schools that are allowed the freedom to be more innovative while being held accountable for advancing student achievement (http://www.publiccharters.org/, 2016). Charter schools enter into an agreement, called a *charter,* with a charter school *authorizer*. State laws govern who may be an authorizer of a charter school. In Indiana, for example, authorizers include one of the following: a governing body, a state educational institution that awards a four year baccalaureate degree, the executive of a consolidated city (such as the mayor), a state charter board, a nonprofit college or university that offers a four year program awarding at least a baccalaureate degree [Indiana Code § 20-24-1-2.5]. An organizer under Indiana code means an entity that has been determined by the Internal Revenue Service to be operating under non-profit status or has applied for such a determination and enters into a contract to operate a charter school [Indiana Code § 20-24-1-7]. Stated in simpler terms, a group of individuals (organizer) who wishes to open a charter school must gain permission from a state governed body (authorizer) like one of those described above. The organizer must submit a proposal to the authorizer for review and determination of whether the charter school will be permitted to open or not. The proposal must include the school's *mission and goals, curriculum and instructional methods, admission policy and criteria, student discipline program, and their plan for selection, retention and compensation of employees* (Indiana charter school board, 2016). Charter schools have become more popular over the last two decades and as of the 2014-2015 school year, there were 6633 charter schools operating in the United States serving 2,686,166 students (http://www.publiccharters.org/, 2016).

Charter schools are described as having more *autonomy* than regular public schools. This warrants some explanation. Brinson and Rosch (2010) studied the level of autonomy afforded

charter schools by analyzing the charter laws of each state. They categorized the autonomy of charter schools in the following ways: vision and culture, instructional program/curriculum, finance/governance, and staffing. *Vision and culture* refers to the level of independence that charter schools are afforded by different states with regard to student discipline and whether or not they are "provided an automatic waiver from state and local policies that typically apply to non-charter schools" (p. 11). Vision and culture also includes whether or not charter schools have the autonomy to establish their own discipline policies and whether or not they are allowed to revise their charter during the first year of implementation. *Instructional program/curriculum* addresses the level at which each state allows a charter school to set their own calendar and school hours and to decide who provides their special education services. Under the category of *finance/governance*, the authors studied to what extent states allow charter schools to manage their budget without governmental interference. The category of *staffing* has to do with whether or not individual states require that charter schools hire certified teachers or allow those without a teaching license to teach specific subject areas. Although most state laws *do* require charter school teachers to be certified, federal charter school law does not (Brinson & Rosch, 2010). Non-certified teachers are less likely to be knowledgeable about special education law (Fierros & Blomberg, 2005). Autonomy in the area of staffing for charter schools would seem to conflict with federal laws that *all* public schools must follow. According to Yell (2016), IDEA requires that "all special education teachers must be certified in special education and meet the highly qualified teacher requirements of NCLB" (p. 46). However, as of August 1, 2016, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) removed the highly qualified standard that must be met by public school teachers per NCLB (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2016). In the following sections, I will

discuss other relevant laws that are in place to protect SWDs in all public school settings, including charter schools.

II. Legal Requirements pertaining to SWDs at Charter Schools

This brief overview of the legal requirements pertaining to SWD in public schools is not comprehensive. It is presented here to explain what special education is and to illuminate the legal complexities that public schools, including charter schools, face when educating SWDs. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 Act (Section 504, 29 U.S.C. § 794 et seq., 1973), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 42 U.S.C. § 12101, 1990) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1400 et seq., 2004) are all relevant to the education of SWDs. Each of these laws has played a role in ensuring that individuals with disabilities have similar access to educational opportunities as those who are non-disabled. In this section, these relevant laws are described and discussed as they relate to public education. Within the discussion of IDEA, a description of the meaning of *special education* is provided.

Section 504. Section 504 forbids discrimination on the basis of a disability in any program or activity receiving federal funds. As the law relates to public education, to be protected under Section 504, a student must be determined to:

1. have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, or
2. have a record of such impairment, or
3. be regarded as having such an impairment [34 C.F.R. §104.3 (j)]

This means that a student with a disability that limits a major life activity, such as caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, or

working, is entitled to reasonable accommodations to access education (Giuliani, 2012). Such accommodations are written into a Section 504 plan. According to Yell (2016), a 504 plan…

> should document (a) the nature of the student's disability and the major life activity it limits, (b) the basis for determining the disability, (c) the educational impact of the disability, (d) necessary accommodations, and (e) placement. (p. 98)

Necessary accommodations in the school setting may include the use of extended time on tests, a wheelchair ramp, enlarged print materials or Braille, or allowing students to present what they learned in a different way, such as speaking rather than writing (Giuliani, 2012).

Section 504 *does not* include a specific list of disabilities that deems a student eligible for school based accommodations. However, typical health conditions that are at times addressed with Section 504 eligibility in the school setting include attention deficit and/or hyperactivity disorder, cancer, physical impairments, epilepsy, and diabetes (Giuliani, 2012).

ADA. According to Yell (2016), the impact of ADA on services for SWDs is limited to extending the requirements within Section 504. ADA defines disability and those protected by the law the same way that Section 504 does. It differs from Section 504 in that the ADA is broader in scope and extends protections for individuals with disabilities to the private sector, impacting private employers and commercial entities. The ADA does impact public education as it pertains to schools hiring of employees that meet the definition of disabled. Also, Yell states, "public education is affected in the areas of public access and in the preparation of students with disabilities to take advantage of the law's provisions" (p. 109). Although ADA and Section 504 are important laws pertaining to SWDs in public schools, the most relevant law is IDEA.

IDEA: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Congress originally enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) in 1975 which was renamed

IDEA in 1990. The purpose of the Act was to ensure that all children with disabilities had available to them a free appropriate public education and that their rights and the rights of their parents were protected. Prior to the enactment of P.L. 94-142, millions of children with disabilities were denied access to public schools and opportunities to learn (Giuliani, 2012). In addition to the 1990 Reauthorization, it was reauthorized again in 1997 and 2004. It was given an optional new name of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA).

According to Yell (2016), IDEA can be divided into eight major principles that are useful for a thorough understanding of the law. Six of these major principles that relate most closely to this study are described in the following subsections. Because my study examines whether the charter school appears to be following IDEA mandates, these main principles define what the charter school is required to do under federal law.

Zero reject. Perhaps the most significant foundational principle of IDEA is that of *zero reject.* This means that all students who are eligible for services under IDEA are entitled to a free appropriate public education (FAPE). The zero reject principle applies "regardless of the severity of the disability" (Yell, p. 57). Not only does this principle require public schools to accept eligible students with a disability into their school, but also puts a burden on the state education agency schools to *find and evaluate* students who are not yet eligible for IDEA services. This requirement is called the "child find system" (p. 58). Each state is free to develop their own child find system, but they must identify the agency that will be used to coordinate child find tasks and the resources needed to accomplish the child find. School districts usually execute, on the state's behalf, child find activities in their jurisdictions. According to Yell (2016) a school's child find activities can take many forms. These include, but are not limited to, referrals, public meetings,

door-to-door visits, contacting pediatricians, contacting daycare providers, and kindergarten screenings.

Identification and Evaluation. According to Yell (2016), IDEA requires that before a student is placed in a special education program, he or she must be evaluated to determine several factors:

> …(a) whether the student has an IDEA disability, (b) if the student requires special education and related services because of his or her disability, and (c) the nature and extent of the student's academic and functional needs that will be addressed in the individualized education program (IEP). (p.187)

Unlike Section 504, IDEA *does* provide a finite list of 13 disability categories that determine whether a child is eligible for special education services. A child with a disability includes one with a cognitive disability, hearing impairment, a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment, a serious emotional disability, an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairment, specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, developmental delay, or multiple disabilities [34 C.F.R. § 300.8]. Each category has a specific definition and criteria that the student must meet in order to be eligible for special education services. For this study, it is important to understand the process of identifying and serving eligible students under IDEA.

The identification and evaluation process begins when a parent, personnel from a state educational agency, or personnel from the school believes a student has a disability and refers the student to a school's multidisciplinary team (MDT) (Yell, 2016). The MDT usually consists of a student's parents, general education teachers, and someone qualified to conduct individual student assessments. The MDT is responsible for making the decision if a student needs a

complete evaluation for IDEA eligibility and services. If the team decides that the student should be evaluated, the parents must give written consent before the evaluation takes place. Once evaluated, the MDT determines whether or not the student is eligible for special education and related services. If the student is eligible, the team must determine the student's specific individual needs and develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP is a written document that serves as a blueprint for a student's educational program and constitutes a student's FAPE (Yell, 2016).

Free and appropriate public education (FAPE). FAPE is an important IDEA principle for my study because it consists of specially designed instruction and services designed to meet a student's "unique educational needs" (Yell, p. 158). Providing FAPE is central to a public school's compliance with federal law. FAPE is described as special education and related services that

- are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge
- meet state standards
- include preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the state
- are provided in conformity with the individualized education program [34 C.F.R. § 300.17]

FAPE must be available to all children living in a state between the ages of 3 and 21, including children with disabilities who have been suspended or expelled from school (Giuliani, 2012). Within IDEA, special education is described as specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including instruction conducted in

the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings [34 C.F.R. § 300.39]. According to Giuliani (2012), specially designed instruction means:

> ...adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to address the unique needs of the child that result from the child's disability; and to ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that the child can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children. (p. 29)

Under IDEA, every student who receives special education must have an IEP [34 C.F.R. § 300.23]. Each IEP includes the student's present level of academic and functional performance, a statement of measurable goals and the means to measure them, a statement of special education and related services that will be provided to the child and an explanation of the extent to which the child will participate with nondisabled children. Also, a statement of appropriate accommodations necessary for the student to participate in measures of academic achievement or the need for alternative assessments must be included in the IEP. The projected dates for the provision of services, transition services that prepare for adult living after high school and, when appropriate, a statement regarding the transfer of rights to the student upon reaching the age of majority under state law are also components of an eligible student's IEP (Yell, 2016).

Development of a student's IEP is conducted by an IEP team. The team consists of the student's parents, a regular education teacher, a special education teacher, a representative of the public agency who has the authority to commit resources toward the child's education, and an individual who can interpret evaluation results. When age-appropriate, the child with a disability and a transition services participant who can assist with the student's adult services after high school is also part of the team (Yell, 2016).

In short, an IEP summarizes all the information gathered concerning the student, sets the expectations of what the student will learn over the next year, and the type and amount of special services the student will receive. Perhaps most relevant to my study, the IEP team determines the child's least restrictive environment for receiving special education services.

Least restrictive environment. Least restrictive environment (LRE) means that a child receiving special education services will receive specialized instruction, as much as possible, in a setting that includes students who are not disabled. Special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily [34 C.F.R. § 300.114(a)(2)(i)]. This requirement also applies to nonacademic activities and extracurricular activities—for example, lunch and recess—as well as academic activities [34 C.F.R. § 300.117]. The IDEA principle of LRE is especially relevant to my study because some charter schools may not be able to offer a continuum of placement options needed to provide a student FAPE. A majority of charter schools utilize the inclusion model, where students get their services in the regular education setting either due to philosophical preference or budget constraints (Fiore, et al., 2000). Further, charter schools that are designed specifically for SWDs may not be able to meet the spirit of LRE because they are predominantly populated with SWDs leaving no options for placement in classrooms with peers without disabilities (Decker et al., 2015, Mead, 2008).

Procedural safeguards. A central principle of IDEA is the procedural safeguards to protect the interests of SWDs and to ensure that parents have equal participation in the special education process [34 C.F.R. § 300.500 *et seq.*]. These safeguards consist of four components:

general safeguards, independent educational evaluations, the appointment of surrogate parents when needed, and dispute resolution (Yell, 2016).

General safeguards for parents and students refer to IDEA's notice and consent requirements, including giving parents a reasonable amount of time prior to the school's initiating or changing the student's identification, evaluation, or educational placement. Parental consent must be obtained prior to conducting a pre-placement evaluation and again prior to initial placement in a special education program [34 C.F.R. § 300.504[b] *et. seq.*].

With regard to independent educational evaluations, parents, when in disagreement with the evaluation done by the school, have a right to obtain an independent evaluation at public expense [34 C.F.R. § 300.503]. In such a case the school must supply the parents with information about where the independent evaluation may be done and either pay for it or otherwise ensure that it is done at no cost to the parent (Yell, 2016).

When applicable, the school is responsible to provide a SWD with a surrogate parent to protect his or her rights if the parents of the child cannot be located or if he or she is a ward of the state. School employees or individuals from other agencies that work on behalf of the child that may have a conflict of interest may not serve as surrogate parents. How the school selects surrogate parents is addressed under state law and therefore is not directly addressed by IDEA (Yell, 2016).

An additional component of IDEA procedural safeguards involves disputes that may arise between schools and parents/students. When parents and the school disagree about any matters concerning the student's FAPE, either party may request a due process hearing. Due process hearings are conducted by either the local education agency or the state educational agency responsible for educating the child. The hearing is a forum for both sides to present their

arguments to an impartial third party, known as the due process officer (Yell, 2016). The IDEA amendments of 1997 required that states offer parents the option of a *mediation process* to resolve disputes with schools. This process is voluntary and must not be used by the schools "to deny or delay a parent's right to a due process hearing" (p. 60). In this process a trained mediator tries to facilitate an agreement between the parent and school officials regarding the matter in dispute.

Parent participation. Provisions of IDEA that require parent participation include evaluation, IEP meetings, and placement decisions. The goal of the parent participation principle of IDEA is to ensure that parents have a meaningful role in the education of their children. Parent involvement is crucial to successful results for students (Yell, 2016) and the parent participation provision of IDEA has been "one of the cornerstones of the IDEA" (p. 62).

There are some important distinctions between the rights afforded to students who qualify for Section 504 eligibility and that of IDEA. A student who qualifies for services under IDEA, in all cases, would qualify as a student with a disability under Section 504, but the converse is not always true (Giuliani, 2012). This is because Section 504 eligibility may cover students with *no* educational need, such as a wheelchair-bound student who simply needs access to a school building via ramps, lifts, or other accommodations. In such a case, there would be no need for the student to have specialized instruction in order to learn. IDEA is limited to those students who have an educational need. Also, unlike IDEA and its 13 specific eligibility areas, Section 504 does not limit eligibility based on disability category and instead, applies to any student with a mental or physical impairment that substantially impacts any major life activity (Giuliani, 2012).

Despite the differences between Section 504 and IDEA, they both are in place to protect SWDs. Public schools must follow these federal laws. A school's failure to acknowledge the needs of a SWD, or deny them the opportunities afforded to those without disabilities has far-reaching legal implications. Some studies have shown that charter school personnel have an inadequate understanding about the state and federal laws that govern serving students with special needs in the public charter school setting (Estes, 2004, 2008).

Special education legal violations. Charter schools are unique in that they offer a specialized curriculum designed to cater to a particular student interest, ability level, or need, while regular public schools are designed to meet the needs of all students in a geographic area (Garda, 2012). Legal analysts see this conflict as fertile ground for potential legal violations in terms of exclusion and in some cases, discrimination (Decker et al., 2010; Decker, Seitz, & Kulwicki, 2015; Garda, 2012; McKinney & Mead, 1996; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2001). Charter schools must consider the legal rights of SWDs as they develop their school's purpose, mission and curriculum. This is particularly true in the case of charter schools designed to serve students who have been identified as academically gifted and/or talented.

Decker et al. (2010) analyzed potential legal violations that could occur at gifted and talented charter schools referred to as "niche charter schools" (p. 1). The authors' legal analysis included examples of three charter schools that were designed for gifted and talented students. They also examined some of the specialized services provided by each school that were advertised on each school's website. In short, by designing and operating charter schools that have the intent of serving students who function at a high level academically, students who do not possess such gifts, including those with disabilities, may be excluded. The authors examined legal questions that may confront niche charter schools from a state and federal statutory

perspective as well as a federal constitutional perspective. The authors found that how each state develops their charter school laws may have an impact on whether or not these schools violate federal code. Also, as long as gifted charter schools have open enrollment and state that they do not discriminate on basis of academic ability, and there is no evidence of discrimination within the schools, such schools may be "permitted to target a select student body" (p. 10). It was further suggested that to avoid legal challenges, charter schools designed for gifted students should do more than say they will not discriminate based on student ability, but they should further ensure they have curriculum in place that can serve all students, including those with disabilities. These findings are based on a review of the only legal case that deals with the legal challenges to charter schools designed for gifted students.

Central Dauphin School District v. Founding Coalition of the Infinity Charter School involved a school district's denial of a charter school application because the school was designed for gifted and talented students, potentially denying enrollment to SWDs. According to Pennsylvania charter school law, charter schools could not discriminate in admission policies on the basis of intellectual ability. The state Charter School Appeal Board reversed the Dauphin district's denial, because the Infinity Charter School included in their charter proposal that they would accept all students, including those with disabilities. Further, they had included in their charter proposal a budgeted amount earmarked to assist students with special needs. When the case was appealed to the Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court, the district countered that the charter school's marketing strategy, to attract gifted and talented students, was discriminatory. However, the court ruled that marketing toward gifted students and their families did not violate Pennsylvania's charter school law. The dissenting opinion in the *Dauphin* case indicates that charter schools for gifted students will continue to face legal challenges. How they market

themselves amounts to discrimination by "catering to the gifted student and pushing away other students" (Decker, et al, 2010, p. 8).

Some niche charter schools are even designed for students with certain exceptionalities, such as autism (Decker et al., 2015). These charter schools could come under scrutiny at both the state and federal level should a parent of a student with a disability other than autism, or no exceptionality at all, wish to enroll (Mead, 2008, Decker et al., 2015). Also, parents of SWDs who unilaterally enroll their child in a school or setting that is not agreed upon by the child's IEP team may be in violation of IDEA. Mead (2008) explained that "if the parents request a placement that school officials believe violates the foundational principles of FAPE and LRE, officials may refuse" (p. 19). In other words, if the student's IEP team believes that the child's LRE should be the general education classroom with nondisabled students, and the parent enrolls a child in a charter school designed only for SWDs, the student would not be educated in his or her LRE. A charter school that only has SWDs enrolled makes meeting LRE, in the spirit of IDEA, almost impossible if the child's needs do not require a separate setting. This scenario best exemplifies the tension between strict special education law, and a parent's desire to seek out specialized instruction, within the public school sector, that may have a positive impact on their child's education. Some research has been done regarding this tension and fortifies the notion that, in some cases, special education law may impede better outcomes for SWDs.

Garda (2012) recognized a "culture clash" (p. 3) between charter schools and special education because of the focus on accountability of the charter school movement and special education laws that materialized from the civil-rights era of educational reform. This reform emphasized legal processes rather than student outcomes. In recognition of this conflict, Garda asserted that special education law forces independent charter schools to "be all things to all

children--an obligation contrary to charter culture and more onerous than that placed on regular individual schools…" (p. 1). In other words, many charter schools do not have the resources available to regular public school districts when it comes to serving students with significant disabilities, particularly those charter schools that operate independently and bear the cost of all special education services for their students. "Should a student with low-incidence, high cost disabilities enroll, the associated costs could run to tens of thousands of dollars per year, potentially bankrupting a small school" (O'Neill, Wenning & Giovannetti, 2002, p. 3).

Garda suggested that either charter schools must succumb to the expectations of special education law or special education law must become more flexible to make school choice a meaningful reality for SWDs. In the end, Garda sides with the equitable services for SWDs in charter schools, "Equality is as important as quality for the viability of any education reform and it is not being achieved for disabled students in charter schools" (p. 19).

In spite of the legal tightrope that charter schools negotiate in meeting the needs of SWDs, many parents still find charter schools an appealing alternative to the regular school setting. Finn, Caldwell, and Raub (2006) examined the reasons for some parents choosing a charter school to educate their children with disabilities rather than their regular neighborhood school. The authors used an open-ended interview format with seven parents of SWDs who had been enrolled in a Midwest charter school with a focus on college preparation. Three of the students enrolled had a speech impairment, one was a student with Asperger's Syndrome, one had a behavior disorder, and one had both a learning disability and attention deficit disorder. The authors pursued three lines of inquiry that included the reasons parents chose the charter school setting, their perception of the special education services offered at the charter school, and a comparison between the services their children received at the charter school and the regular

school setting. Several themes emerged in the study with regard to why parents chose to enroll their disabled child in the charter school. Some unwanted changes that occurred in the former regular public school such as a grade reconfiguration that impacted which schools their children would attend were mentioned as a factor. Another common theme included the belief that the charter school had higher academic standards than that of the regular public school. Interestingly, another common theme of the parents interviewed was that the regular public school did not address the special needs of their child, particularly in the area of conducting an evaluation for special education services. Some of the parents stated that the charter school staff and administration willingly provided testing and the necessary services. The special education services at the charter school were perceived as satisfactory by the respondents because of the smaller class sizes, the accessibility of the special education teachers and their willingness to communicate with the parents. When asked to compare the services of the regular public school and the charter school, the authors found that some of the parents were not able to respond since their child had not been identified for services at their former school. Other participants commented on the positive aspects of the charter school's flexibility and accessibility of staff and the smaller size of the charter school. The parents noted a feeling of partnership with the charter school staff and the size of the school made the parents feel that their child was known there, thus making the transition between grades easier.

Parent frustration with the regular public school for being reluctant or slow to test for services may have been a misunderstanding of the school's need to implement pre-referral strategies prior to an evaluation. Several studies have revealed that charter school administrators' understanding of pre-referral strategies as mandated by IDEA was an area in need of improvement (Estes, 2003, 2006; Fiore et al., 2000). Also, the disability categories of each child

mentioned in the study seemed to lend credence to other evidence that charter schools tend to serve students with milder disabilities in greater numbers than those with more severe learning needs (Fierros & Blomberg, 2004; Garda, 2012).

III. Problems SWDs Experience at Charter Schools

Underrepresentation. A lower percentage of SWDs are enrolled in charter schools than in regular public schools (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012; Wolf, 2010). Several studies have not only pointed out this enrollment discrepancy, but also provided some indication of *why* the discrepancy exists.

In 2012, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) examined enrollment levels of SWDs in charter schools. Their report compared the enrollment percentages of SWDs attending regular public schools and charter schools. The study examined school-level data on counts of SWDs among the 41 states with operating charter schools for the 2008-2009 and the 2009-2010 school years. Regular public schools served a higher percentage of special needs students (11.3) than did charter schools (7.7) during the 2008-2009 school year. During the following school year, SWDs made up 8.2% of charter school enrollment compared to 11.1% in the regular public school setting. Iowa, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wyoming charter schools enrolled as many or more SWDs as regular public schools (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012). This may be in part due to the development of charter schools that are specifically designed for SWDs (Decker, et al., 2015). It is important to note that the laws governing charter schools vary from state to state. This could account for some of the state-by-state differences.

Estes (2003) examined SWDs enrolled at charter schools in Texas. She reviewed the data from Texas's Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). Seventy percent of

schools reported enrollment of special needs students at a percentage below the state average of 12.3%. Specifically, Estes found that of the 92 charter schools reporting data, over half reported that SWDs made up less than 10% of their student body. Only 28 of the reporting schools had a percentage of SWDs at or above the state average.

The reasons for lower enrollment of SWDs may be attributed to several factors. Most charter schools have a certain purpose or mission in serving their students that is clearly articulated by some mission statement (Rhim & McLaughlin, 2001). Some states allow charter schools to select students based on academic credentials as long as the enrollment policy aligns with the school's mission (Grant, 2005). Further, charter schools that are designed to serve students who are identified as gifted and talented have gained popularity throughout the country (Decker et al., 2010). Parents of SWDs that struggle to perform academically may not seek enrollment in charter schools that are designed to serve students who achieve at a high level.

Some of the research indicates that charter school personnel have at times discouraged the enrollment of SWDs more directly. Since these students sometimes have challenging behavioral and/or learning difficulties and are in some cases expensive to serve, some charter schools have made efforts to limit their enrollment (Estes, 2004, 2006; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2001; Wolf, 2010). As a case in point, a Civil Rights Complaint was filed on behalf of SWDs in Washington D.C. due to discriminatory enrollment practices of charter schools (Rhim & O'Neill, 2013). The complaint claimed that before admitting applicants, many charter schools ask detailed questions about applicants' disabilities and used the information to exclude them from the lottery for enrollment. Further, when D.C. charters did enroll students with more significant disabilities, they placed them in schools specifically for SWDs violating, in some instances, the IDEA principle of LRE.

Wolf (2010) studied the increase in charter schools and the enrollment of special needs students in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Wolf examined enrollment data and interviewed several categories of participants, including school district personnel, regular and charter school personnel, and community disability advocates. Regular public schools in New Orleans were comprised of between 10% and 22% of SWDs. In comparison, charter schools had only 6% of their enrollment comprised of SWDs. Wolf also discovered evidence of how parents and students were "counseled out" (p. 390) of their decision to enroll in charter schools. Participants from each interview category reported some form of exclusionary practice in their responses. One such practice, known as "dumping" (p. 387), involved forcing students who were unable to perform academically or that had disciplinary issues to transfer back to the regular public school. This practice seems to clearly violate federal laws that forbid public schools from discrimination based on disability.

Estes (2004) interviewed charter school administrators with questions about the IDEA concept of zero reject. Zero reject is the foundational precept of IDEA that states that an education cannot be denied to any individual on the basis of disability (Heward, 2013). Estes asked specifically about the parent interview process prior to enrollment and found that the charter school administrators were honest with parents about the special education services that were available. After describing what the school offered to the parents, the choice was left to them whether or not they wished to enroll their child in the school. All interviewees reported that they accepted SWDs in their charter schools but one director reported that he wouldn't know what to do if a student with moderate or severe cognitive disability were to apply, because he "had no appropriate programs or placements" (p. 263). Further, Estes described a Texas statute that permitted schools to deny enrollment to students with a history of behavioral problems.

Since such behavioral problems might be related to an emotional disability recognized by IDEA, "serious questions are raised concerning the legality of this clause in the Texas statute" (p. 263). This study indicates that some charter school administrators feel less comfortable enrolling students with severe disabilities who would require extensive supports and services. In general, charter schools appear to enroll students with milder disabilities, such as specific learning disabilities, in greater numbers than students who have more severe disabilities (Drame, 2011; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012; Garcy, 2011; McKinney & Mead, 1996; Rhim, Faukner, & McLaughlin, 2006; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2001). This may be due to limited resources, the expense of educating more involved students, and the knowledge base necessary to meet their needs available to charter school practitioners.

Lack of Legal Knowledge and Awareness. The level of knowledge and expertise held by charter school practitioners regarding special education law varies a great deal and is in some cases inadequate (Drame, 2011; Drame & Frattura, 2011; Estes, 2008; Fiore, Harwell, Blackorby, & Finnegan, 2000). Researchers who reviewed charter school applications and interviewed charter school personnel identified a variety of problems with special education at charter schools.

Drame (2011) analyzed the capacity of charter schools in Wisconsin to address the needs of SWDs. The first phase of the study included a content analysis of nine charter school applications to authorizers to determine how much consideration was given to special education during the school's initial planning process. Overall, the nine charter school applications were rated as only "vaguely addressing the consideration of special education" (p. 58). Further analysis was done by the researcher to identify the mention of several specific categories related to special education, including items such as space and facilities, professional development for

staff, transportation, service provisions, and administration. There was little or no mention of special education space and facilities or funding of special education. Further, transportation of SWDs as a related service was not mentioned in any of the nine applications reviewed. Most applications failed to identify who was responsible for administration of special education services and contained little or no provisions for professional development to improve services to SWDs. Drame's study emphasizes the need for charter school providers to have a written plan in place for meeting the needs of SWDs. Decker et al. (2010) also recommended such a practice in order for charter schools to avoid legal challenges. Other studies within this chapter indicate that Wisconsin is not the only state that had failed to plan for SWDs in charter schools.

Fiore, et al. (2000) studied charter schools in 15 different states. The researchers interviewed charter school administrators and staff about special education planning and implementation in their respective charter schools. Some charter school administrators reported that special education programs were implemented only after other program elements were in place, or *after* a SWD had enrolled in the school. A few of the schools operated without a special education program at all. One administrator reported that their charter school personnel "were doing a good job with all students, and that testing and labeling a student would not improve a student's education in any way" (p. 21). Although this statement may be true in that particular setting, it indicates that the school may not be prepared for educating SWDs with more significant disabilities who *do* require special education services.

Some of those interviewed stated that students who enrolled from a regular public school and were already receiving special education services often times would not report their disability status to the charter school. Several administrators were unaware of the process of sending a release of information to the student's former school in order to receive special

education records. It may be possible that parents who did not report their child's special education status upon enrolling in one of the charter schools in Drame's study felt that services were not available at the school or that they would not be welcome to enroll. Also, depending on the special education service model each charter school employs, it may be difficult for a parent to discern what special education services their child might receive, if any.

Fiore et. al. (2000) interviewed school staff with regard to the instructional setting (LRE) that is employed at their particular charter school. Teachers and staff at most of the sites reported that they used the inclusion model for providing services. Inclusion means that SWDs participate in the same activities as non-disabled peers, including general education classes, extracurricular activities and social events (Giuliani, 2012). In the study, this model varied from school to school, where some staff reported that SWDs were in the regular classroom 100% of the day while others reported some use of pull-out instruction. Half of the schools visited provided full inclusion because of pedagogical preference while the other half utilized the inclusion model because of financial constraints or because the staff believed it was "inappropriate to label SWDs" (p. 23). Most of the school administrators reported that they offered related services such as occupational therapy, physical therapy and transportation to their SWDs, but some reported that they did not. Approximately half of the schools included in the study provided no transportation for *any* students. At two of the schools transportation was provided only for SWDs, and a few schools that operated buses did not provide transportation for students with significant disabilities who required accommodations.

Estes (2004) also asked charter school operators about their level of expertise in special education. Participants were asked about IDEA requirements of pre-referral interventions, the referral for special education testing process, the assessment process, behavior intervention

plans, and IEPs. All reported that IEPs were routinely adopted and followed and all but one indicated that behavior intervention plans (BIPs) were prepared as needed for their students. Two of the schools did not attempt pre-referral strategies, three of the administrators interviewed stated that the pre-referral process was explained to their teachers, but was not followed consistently, and only one stated affirmatively that the pre-referral process was followed. One school had no formal referral procedures for students who may qualify for special education services. Estes' study indicates that, at the time, there were significant issues with charter school operators' ability and understanding to serve SWDs legally and effectively.

To assess the change in levels of special education expertise of charter school operators over time, Estes (2008) provided a follow-up to her original study. Estes found that over the course of four years, special education services in charter schools had begun to resemble the "continuum of placements offered in regular public schools" (p. 221). Also, Estes found that charter school administrators had made significant gains in their understanding of pre-referral strategies, the referral process, behavioral intervention plans, and IEPs. However, several of those interviewed admitted that although there was an understanding of pre-referral intervention in their school, it was rarely implemented prior to a formal referral being made.

Estes (2004, 2008) found that charter school practitioners have limited levels of understanding of federal and state laws that govern serving students with special needs in charter schools. Programs for SWDs are therefore implemented inconsistently and in some cases avoided altogether. Some charter schools seem to have evolved in their understanding of their responsibility to SWDs, and struggle with some of the same issues as regular public schools.

Drame and Frattura (2011) utilized a case study approach to examine how one charter school addressed meeting the needs of SWDs. Following a semi-structured interview process

with school staff, the authors were able to categorize responses into three main categories: philosophy and vision, infrastructure, and teaching and learning. Within the philosophy and vision category, the sub-themes of school culture, the perceptions of general education teachers, and the perceptions of special education support services emerged. The authors reported that general education teachers were perceived as "having limited skills and preparation for working with students with special needs, particularly in the area of making curricular adaptations and accommodations" (p. 63). Special education teachers were perceived as hard working individuals that were unable to adequately support students and staff due to limited resources. Specifically, general education teachers reported that access to special education personnel for specific support and professional training was rare. Special education teachers reported difficulties with the "active engagement of general educators in the IEP process" (p. 64). Effective pre-referral strategies and striking an appropriate balance between inclusive special instruction and pull-out models were issues of concern among the charter school staff. A school's climate and culture regarding inclusive practice likely plays a role in improving the outcomes for SWDs in the charter school setting. It also seems important for charter schools to effectively plan for SWDs from the very beginning.

Downing, Spencer, and Cavallaro (2004) examined a charter school that was intended to be fully inclusive of SWDs. The site for the study was opened in September of 2001 and served approximately 80 students in grades K-4, twenty percent of which were identified for special education services. The school had a partnership with a local university as well as the local education agency (LEA). The study generated four themes regarding the first year operation of the school: "critical components that made it work, positive outcomes, challenges overcome, and ongoing challenges" (p.15). The *critical components that made it work* included active parental

involvement, a high-quality faculty and staff, enrichment opportunities offered by the school, and a "belief in inclusion" (p. 16). *Positive outcomes* were attributed to acceptance of diversity, student achievement, staff professional growth, collaborative teaming, and a positive and supporting environment. Some of the *challenges* of the first year noted by the respondents included a lack of space and materials, faculty and staff turnover, meeting the needs of students, and developing effective systems for collaboration among the staff. *Ongoing challenges* were identified as training needs, behavior of students, a high ratio of students with special needs, and the need for a more challenging curriculum. The critical components mentioned in this study stand in stark contrast to other studies in my literature review. It would appear that initial planning for students with special needs in a charter school setting is important. A strong philosophy of inclusive practice could eliminate some of the legal problems faced by charter schools that inadvertently exclude students through specialized curricular offerings or inexperience with federal law.

Estes (2006) found that administrators' inexperience was a factor mainly in the area of the disciplinary protections for students with disability under IDEA. One charter school administrator admitted that "his hand had been slapped" (p. 58) for expelling a student with an IEP who had been classified with an emotional disability without carrying out the IDEA mandated manifestation determination meeting. A manifestation determination is a specific IEP team meeting, where the team decides if the student's behavior that resulted in disciplinary action was directly related to his or her disability *or* if the behavior was the result of the student's IEP not being implemented correctly (Yell, p. 67). If either of these conditions exist, the student cannot be expelled (Giuliani, 2012). Most of the administrators interviewed in Estes' 2006 study understood that students with IEPs could not be expelled without following the protocols laid out

in IDEA, but at least two of the administrators stated that they would send students back to their regular public school if they were unable to adhere to the charter school's code of conduct. When asked if this policy included SWDs, both of the administrators answered yes, but one of the administrators asked that her response be kept "off the record" (p. 59). This administrator's response indicates that perhaps not only inexperience is at play when a SWD has their rights infringed upon. It is possible that such actions are a deliberate means of removing from school a student who exhibits problem behavior.

Limited understanding on the part of charter school personnel of the requirements of IDEA puts many of these schools at risk for legal challenges from parents and/or legal advocates for SWDs. The highly regulated arena of special education law conflicts with the freedom, or perceived freedoms, of which charter schools have been afforded.

IV. Suggested Solutions

Partnerships. Perhaps the answer to some of the legal and practical tensions of meeting the needs of SWDs in charter schools lies with additional state and federal mandates. Requiring charter schools to include a documented and viable plan for legally serving students with special needs collaboration with other entities may relieve some of the tensions. Garda (2012) recommended prohibiting charter schools from becoming independent, stand-alone organizations and compelling them to partner with regular educational school districts or State Educational Agencies (SEAs). This, according to Garda would improve a charter school's capacity to offer a full range of services to SWDs and perhaps ease the financial burden to do so. Financial and technical support provided to charter schools from outside entities seems to play an important role in charter schools' ability to maintain compliance with federal special education law (Garda, 2012; Rhim & O'Neill, 2013). Too often, charter school practitioners face ambiguities about

their responsibility to SWDs resulting in potential legal problems and ultimately poor educational outcomes for students (McLaughlin & Henderson, 1998).

Rhim and McLaughlin (2001) engaged in a three-year study that revealed a fundamental gap between the autonomous nature of charter schools and the highly regulated nature of special education. The study included interviews with state directors of special education and state directors of charter schools from several states to examine policy issues with regard to serving SWDs in charter schools. The authors categorized charter school governance with regard to special education responsibility in three ways. These categories included total link, partial link, and no link. A *total link* charter school is part of a regular school district's special education system. A *partial link* charter school is independent but must negotiate some partnership with the regular local school district for services of SWDs. A *no link* charter school is legally independent, operates as an autonomous district, and is fully responsible for the services provided to SWDs.

From state to state, the authors found that the various linkages between charter schools and other entities can create confusion with regard to the burden of responsibility for special education administration. Specifically, Rhim and McLaughlin (2001) found that partial link and no link charter schools are "struggling to negotiate" (p. 377) who is responsible for areas such as assessment and evaluation of students referred to special education, development of IEPs, and the provision of FAPE. One state director of special education stated that the first charter school applicants did not believe that special education would be an important issue. Many of the applicants were totally unaware of the regulations required for serving students with special needs and were surprised that they had to abide by them.

Rhim, Ahearn, and Lange (2007) examined the charter school laws of 41 states to identify characteristics that related to special education. The study included an examination of the legal status or "ownership" (p. 54) of meeting the needs of SWDs in the charter schools. The authors found that some charter schools are permitted to operate independently, while others are required to engage in partnerships with regular LEAs. Rhim et al. (2007) found that "the lack of specificity may contribute to confusion over roles and responsibilities, especially in areas related to legal responsibility, funding, and accountability" (p. 57).

McLaughlin and Henderson (1998) conducted a study about how Colorado's charter schools were responding to the education of SWDs. The authors employed a survey of individual charter schools in Colorado, interviewed state level educational personnel, did site visits in four schools, and document reviews of charter contracts. Like the Rhim et al. (2007) study, McLaughlin and Henderson found that in Colorado, legal and administrative responsibilities for special education were ambiguous. This ambiguity was clearly exemplified in several of the interviews conducted in the study. Two of the charter school directors believed that there were a large number of students who they believed would qualify for special education. However, both believed they were providing these students with intensive, individualized instruction and that "there was neither a need nor a fiscal incentive to identify students" (p. 105). Some charter school administrators believed that their local school district was responsible for providing special education for eligible students. Others disagreed, stating that the issue needed "further state policy clarification" (p. 105). When asked about what would need to be done if a student with significant and costly special education needs were to enroll in one of their charter schools, a common response was "the local district would have to step in and do what was needed" (p. 105). Some of these administrators felt that they should not have to provide special education

services since the parents of these students had decided to opt out of the services offered at their regular public school.

Drame's (2011) study of Wisconsin charter schools addressed issues faced by independent charter schools as compared to those who engaged in partnerships with local school districts or other educational service providers. Seventy-eight percent of independent charter school operators indicated that they lacked the core knowledge of special education laws and regulations needed to effectively administer such programs in their charter schools compared to 63% of respondents who were partnered with local school districts. Securing special education staff and resources was also more difficult for independent charter school operators when compared to school district charters (89% to 70%). Also, implementing IEPs from other districts when students moved into a charter school was reported as challenging for 90% of independent charters compared to 57% of school district charters. Many of the issues described in this study seem to be more daunting for charter schools in their initial years of operation, particularly in the areas of the financial issues related to educating SWDs and understanding special education regulations.

Technical assistance. My literature review indicates that there are problems with the equitable services of SWDs in charter schools (Drame, 2011; Drame & Frattura, 2011; Estes, 2008; Fiore, Harwell, Blackorby, & Finnegan, 2000). Federal technical assistance programs have been created to assist charter schools in addressing this important issue. The National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS) is one such organization. Their goal is to advocate for students with diverse learning needs to ensure that if they are interested in attending charter schools, they are granted equal access (National center for special education in charter schools, 2016). The center's website offers tools and resources to assist charter school

authorizers and organizers in their efforts to meet the needs of SWDs. For authorizers, resources include rubrics to assess how special education is addressed in charter school applications (Rhim & O'Neill, 2012). Best practices in each rubric include articulation of a clear plan for serving SWDs, a clear plan for development and implementation of IEPs, and having at least one staff member who fully understands the "specific requirements of IDEA for applying discipline for students with disabilities" (p. 10).

The Center also provides many resources for charter school organizers. The *Promising Practices* series (Petit, 2015) is a periodic publication on the website. It is designed to highlight "best practices for charter schools" (p. 1). Each publication highlights a charter school that is providing positive opportunities for SWDs and serves as a model for others to follow. The Center also has provided a report that explores the relevant legal framework that impacts special education in the charter sector, describes the challenges and opportunities presented by state public charter school laws and identifies key accountability rules for serving SWDs (Rhim & O'Neill, 2013). Within the report, charter school organizers are provided guidance on issues that have proven to be problematic when it comes to serving SWDs. Of particular relevance is the guidance provided on hiring practices by charter schools. According to the authors, "Providing differentiated supports to students with diverse learning needs depends on hiring skilled employees who not only understand special education law, but also, more important, understand how to accommodate individual students' needs" (p. 3). Also, partnerships with outside agencies are suggested to improve the outcomes for SWDs in charter schools…

> Many public charter schools are small, have limited budgets, and lack key institutional routines and structures. While these conditions are challenging,

> they create an environment that is ripe for entrepreneurial innovation. Strategic partnerships with other public charter schools, existing community organizations (e.g., mental health providers), and even traditional public schools can build and extend charter schools' capacity related to special education. (p. 3)

The specific resources available, like those offered by the NCSECS, indicate there is an ongoing need for charter schools to increase their capacity to effectively serve SWDs.

V. Conclusions and Implications for Further Study

As a whole, the literature reviewed in this chapter presented some of the problems charter schools have in adequately meeting the needs of SWDs. However, it lacked some components that I wanted to address in my study. The literature lacked an adequate amount of research on how charter schools address their own unique problems with SWDs. How might they serve a student that has extraordinary needs with the limited resources they have on hand? How does the school secure necessary staff training for a student who has needs beyond their current level of expertise? How *prepared* does the school staff feel that they are to address such issues?

The majority of the studies about SWDs at charter schools fail to uncover details about what is occurring at the school-level for SWDs. For example, Drame's (2011) study of Wisconsin charter schools analyzed charter school applications for evidence of planning for SWDs and surveyed charter school operators about problems with implementing special education programs in their schools. This study lacks important details on how individual charter schools address the problems that they face with the resources they have available. Likewise, the GAO (2012) study provides a nationwide perspective on the issue of SWDs being equitably served in charter schools, but contextual details from individual charter schools were lacking. Finn, Caldwell, and Raub (2006) *did* study an individual charter school, but only interviewed

parents of SWDs. Contextual detail and comparisons among different interview groups could have been added if they would have included school staff and students in their study. Drame and Frattura (2011) used a case study approach to study a charter school's efforts at serving SWDs. The research consisted primarily of interview data, mainly gleaned from school staff. Research questions were not designed to elicit responses about services to SWDs being compliant with IDEA, which is something I wanted to explore in my study. Also, no direct observations of special education services or IEP team meetings were reported in the study. What Drame and Frattura (2011) *did* include were participant perceptions of how the mission and curricular focus of the charter school impacted services for SWDs. They provided an example of how a charter school with an "emphasis on high academic standards, a college preparatory curriculum, and character and leadership development" (p. 59) impacted the services to SWDs in the school setting. In multiple responses, the authors found that the school's current curriculum and practices worked "against the needs of significantly struggling learners" (p. 62). How the mission and curricular offerings of a charter school impact the school's preparedness to effectively serve SWDs was something that I wanted to explore more extensively. Also, Drame and Frattura's study was the only one I found that employed a case study model, which was an approach that held promise for answering my research questions.

From my literature review I have identified three main gaps that I wanted to address in my research: (a), Lack of contextual detail that addresses how individual charter schools handle problems with serving SWDs in their own setting with their own resources; (b), Lack of multiple perspectives on the quality and IDEA compliance of services for SWDs; (c), Multiple perspectives on how a charter school's mission and curricular focus either enhances or inhibits services to SWDs. To fill these gaps, I used a case study approach based on one charter school. I

interviewed parents, students and school staff and engaged in formal and informal observations to answer my research questions. My inquiry included direct questions to participants with regard to IDEA compliance and how the school's mission, curriculum, and instructional practices impacted their ability to serve SWDs. Observations allowed me to compare what I was told in interviews to what I witnessed in the school setting.

Filling these gaps in the literature will inform charter school sponsors and organizers of the importance of effective planning for SWDs that may need a great deal of support to access the curriculum offered by the charter school. Also, my study may provide legislators with information that will assist them in making decisions regarding charter school laws. Most importantly, my study may help families of SWDs who are considering enrollment in a charter school to ask the right questions about services available for their child.

VI. Assumptions that Emerged from the Review of Literature

Yin (2009) suggested that researchers develop some propositions that align with the research questions in order to direct attention to components that should be addressed within the scope of the study. Some of the propositions, or assumptions, that emerged during my review of the relevant literature included the following: 1.) Charter schools are not conceived to meet the needs of all students (Garda, 2012); 2.) In some cases, high levels of collaboration and innovation are necessary for charter school staff to meet the needs of SWDs (Downing, Spencer & Cavallaro, 2004; Drame & Frattura, 2011); 3.) Some parents are willing to forego all or some of their child's special education services in return for other educational benefits provided by charter schools (Finn, Caldwell & Raub, 2006) 4.) Charter schools educate SWDs in a manner that is specific to their school's mission and resources (Garda, 2012). Most of these assumptions,

in one way or another, illuminated the potential for conflict between the autonomy of charter schools and rigid legal guidelines for educating SWDs.

The above assumptions align with the main research questions that are addressed in my study: 1.) What are the perceptions of a charter school's administrators, staff, parents, and students regarding their school's abilities to serve SWDs in compliance with the main principles of IDEA?; 2.) In what ways do the school's mission, curricular design, and physical structure enhance or inhibit efforts to meet the needs of SWDs?; 3.) What training, resources, and expertise do the study participants perceive as needed to effectively serve SWDs in the charter school setting?

Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction

My review of the relevant literature indicated that some charter school practitioners have inadequate understanding about the rules and regulations involved with serving SWDs (Drame, 2011; Drame & Frattura, 2011; Estes, 2008; Fiore, Harwell, Blackorby, & Finnegan, 2000). What the current research did not reveal, however, is how charter school stakeholders, parents, school staff, and students felt about the services provided for SWDs in their own setting. Therefore, I chose to conduct a case study of a charter school to fill this gap in the literature.

This chapter will begin with the research questions that guided my study, followed by a description of my case study approach. Then, I will describe the setting for my study, the participants, along with a rationale for my choices. A description of the data collection procedures, instruments and methods for analysis will be shared. The chapter will close with discussion of the limitations and strengths of my study's methods.

I. Research Questions

The following research questions were developed as the result of my literature review and will extend the relevant literature on SWDs being served in charter schools:

1.) What are the perceptions of a charter school's administrators, staff, parents, and students regarding their school's abilities to serve SWDs in compliance with the main principles of IDEA?

2.) In what ways do the school's mission, curricular design, and physical structure enhance or inhibit efforts to meet the needs of SWDs?

3.) What training, resources, and expertise do the study participants perceive as needed to effectively serve SWDs in the charter school setting?

Answering these questions through my research will challenge the assumptions I described at the end of the last chapter. These assumptions include: 1.) charter schools offer a certain type of curriculum that attracts a certain type of student, 2.) charter schools were not designed to meet the needs of all students, 3.) high levels of collaboration and innovation are necessary for charter school staff to meet the needs of SWDs, 4.) Some parents are willing to forego all or some of their child's special education services in return for other educational benefits provided by charter schools, 5.) Charter schools educate SWDs in a manner that is specific to their school's mission and resources.

My research questions, and the answers to them, are highly dependent on the context of the school and the perspectives of school stakeholders within that context. I found no case studies in my literature review that addressed the perspectives of members of a charter school community with any significant level of detail. I wanted to engage in a qualitative case study that would address that gap in the literature.

II. Case Study

Through researching the case study as a method of inquiry, I decided that a qualitative case study would be an effective way to pursue answering my questions and testing my assumptions. I wanted to interview members of a school community, conduct observations in multiple settings, and review school records and documents. The most effective way to engage in my study was to gain access to a charter school and explore the perspectives of those that are part of the school community. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2011), qualitative research utilizes actual settings as the main source of data and the researcher as the main instrument. Further, "qualitative researchers go to the particular setting under study because they are concerned with *context*" (p. 4).

A case study is a method of inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context (McDuffie & Scruggs, 2008; Yin, 2009). According to McDuffie and Scruggs (2008), a case may be based on an individual, a group of individuals, a classroom, a school, or even an event. For my study, the *contemporary phenomenon* includes the equitable access to charter schools for SWDs that was under consideration in multiple studies in my literature review (Fierros & Blomberg, 2005; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012; Wolf, 2010). The *real-life context* was addressed through my choice of data to be collected, which included interviews with parents, school staff, and students, review of school documents and data, and observations in multiple settings. According to Yin (2009), "the case study's unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence--documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations" (Chapter 1, para. 27). When engaging in a case study, Stake (2005) recommends collecting data on several types of information, including the nature of the case, its historical background, the physical setting, legal or political contexts, and gathering the information from those who are familiar with the case. The field experiences in which I engaged during my study has addressed the information recommended by Stake (2005).

Another reason for using a case study approach was that during my literature review I was able to find only one study where case study approach was utilized. I wanted to add to the case study research on charter schools and pay close attention to contextual factors such as school culture and the attitudes of staff members. I chose to include these influences in order to provide "thick description" (Mertens, 2010, p. 259), where careful attention is paid to the contextual features within the data collection.

The assumption that charter schools largely serve SWDs in a manner that is specific to the school's culture, mission and resources also oriented my inquiry toward a case study model.

The unique curricular focus of any one charter school may make it easier, or more difficult, to meet the needs of SWDs. For instance, a charter school designed for students who have been identified as academically gifted, probably is not prepared to serve students with, say, significant cognitive disabilities. When a charter school organizer makes a *decision* on their curricular focus and mission, they may inadvertently be excluding, or limiting their ability to adequately serve SWDs (Decker, et al., 2010). According to Schramm (1971), "a case study tends to deal with a major decision, its genesis and its apparent effect, or, more often, with the reasons for, the execution of, and the apparent effects of an entire project" (p. 3).

A final reason for choosing a case study model was because I thought it would provide valuable information to the members of the school's community and assist them in better meeting the needs of SWDs. As I began to interact with the staff members at the study site, I found that they wanted to use my study as a way to examine their special education services. Upon my initial meeting with the school's director, she stated that my study could provide the school with a reflective process to improve services to SWDs. Also, interview participants, the special education coordinator in particular, asked questions about my potential findings. She wanted assurance that I would be sharing the results of my study with her. I informed the school's director that I would be willing to present the results of my study at a staff meeting.

Beyond the walls of the charter school that I studied, I am hopeful that my research will assist a parent of a child with a disability in asking important questions prior to enrolling their child in *any* charter school. Can they meet the needs of my child? Do they want to? Are there supports in place to make my child's education here a meaningful experience? Data gleaned from the perceptions of charter school personnel could provide parents with clues of what to

expect when enrolling a SWD in a setting that offers a specialized curriculum that may or may not be designed for those with specific learning needs related to a disability.

III. Setting, Participants, and Rationale

In selecting a site for my study, several criteria were important. First, I wanted a charter school that offered a unique curricular focus (e.g., emphasis on college prep, fine or performing arts). Second, I wanted a site that operated independently from a local school corporation. A stand-alone charter school might better illuminate the issues of serving SWDs without outside expertise or experience. Also this site requirement would likely illuminate the collaboration and creativity among school staff needed to meet the needs of SWDs without the guidance of an outside entity. In such a scenario, the members of the organization would need to plan and implement programs for SWDs in a manner that is unique to their mission and available resources. It was also important to study a site that implemented a regular classroom structure rather than a computer-based, online learning model. This would provide insight on how the school staff addresses inclusive practices, differentiation of instruction, co-teaching, and the IDEA requirement of serving students in the least restrictive environment. Finally, I wanted a site that, at a minimum, served grades K-6 so that I could find out more about their special education referral process, including pre-referral interventions. Pre-referral interventions and the special education referral process were particularly problematic for many charter school administrators in my literature review (Estes, 2004, Drame and Frattura, 2011).

Montessori Village charter school met all of my site requirements and was within traveling distance. My choice provided some interesting dynamics with regard to the research questions described above. My subsequent research of Montessori instruction showed that there is close alignment between special education and Montessori methodology and philosophy. I was

unaware of the connection when I chose to study Montessori Village. I discovered that some consider Maria Montessori as one of the first special educators. McKenzie and Zascavage (2012), described how Montessori and special education have been intentionally combined: "Montessori practices such as the use of manipulative materials, individual instruction, and academic self-regulation are considered effective educational methodology for both the typical student and the student with developmental/learning disabilities" (p.32). Cossentino (2010) emphasized that the Montessori philosophy of embracing learning differences and emphasis on hands-on, differentiated and self-paced learning provide "a template for best practice in both general and exceptional classrooms" (p. 38).

It would appear from my readings about Montessori methodology that a Montessori charter school would have an *advantage*, so to speak, in meeting the needs of SWDs when compared to charter schools with a different curricular focus. After some consideration, I came to the conclusion that a Montessori school could be an appropriate site to explore my research questions. My decision was fortified by subsequent research of Montessori Village on the state department of education website. I noticed that the school's special education enrollment was *higher* than the state average and some of the local, regular public schools in the same county. To me, this indicated that they may not be discouraging enrollment of SWDs like some charter schools described in my literature review. Further research on the state teacher licensing website revealed that Montessori Village had *only one* certified staff member who was licensed to teach special education. I became curious on *how* the school was managing their services for a higher than average population of SWDs with only one special education teacher.

Obviously, the impact of my choice of case study site would need to be discussed as a factor in my research findings. As it turned out, the Montessori Method did, in fact, impact the

special education services offered at the school. Study participants were aware of the Montessori alignment with special education best practices and expectations. This will be detailed in later Chapter Five.

Site access. Site access started with a phone call to the school's director. I shared my desire to study her school and set up a face to face meeting to discuss the details. Before we met, I emailed the director a copy of my study information sheet that had been prepared for submission to the Human Subjects Review Board of the university. When we met, the school director said that she felt that my study's findings may improve their services to SWDs. I told her that I wanted to interview school staff, parents, and students who were 18 years of age or older. She said that she would share my study information sheet with staff, parents, and some students and let me know who would like to participate in the study. Several days later, the director provided me with the contact information of seven willing participants. Only one staff member from the original list of potential participants was excluded from the interviews. This was because there was no response to my requests to establish a time and date for the interview.

Participants. I contacted each potential participant by phone or email. After providing each with the study information sheet, I explained that I would be using pseudonyms for participant names, as well as for the school, in an effort to maintain confidentiality. Below is a list of the interview participants.

- The school's principal/director (Brenda)
- 2 teachers, one general education teacher in the teen program and one special education teacher (Erica and Nicole, respectively); Nicole was the only licensed special education teacher and also served as the school's special education coordinator

- 2 parents who had children enrolled in the school and receive special education services (Melissa and Kathy)
- 2 students (18 years of age) who had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for addressing a disability (Grant and Alan)

It is important to note that the students interviewed were *not* the offspring of the parents listed above. The choice of participants for the study provided a balance of perspectives and allowed for comparisons between students, staff, and parents.

As I planned field experiences with school staff, I began to prepare myself to answer questions from participants about the purpose of the study and the procedures involved. Bogdan and Biklen (2011) suggested that researchers prepare to answer several questions from potential participants. I prepared myself to answer questions such as what I was actually going to do, whether or not I would be disruptive, what I would do with my results/findings, how they, as a school community might benefit from my research, and why I chose their school for my study. Initially and throughout the course of my inquiry, participants and other members of the school community seemed comfortable with me and were very welcoming. The office staff and the school director provided me with appropriate spaces to interview and to work on my field notes. I was allowed access to classrooms, staff meetings and interview sessions with parents, staff, and students.

IV. Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

Over the course of my research I conducted four observations, did seven interviews, reviewed the school's demographic data on the state website, and reviewed the documents linked on the school's staff managed website. The field experiences (interviews and observations) were done in no particular order. In other words, I did not complete all interviews prior to observations

or vice versa. Rather, I interviewed participants as their schedule would allow and in some cases engaged in an observation prior to or following one of the scheduled interviews. Informal observations, in the school lobby, parking lot or other campus area, occurred while I was waiting for formal field experiences to begin. The details of my data collection experiences are detailed below.

Observations. Most of the study's data came from semi-structured interviews, but to provide richness and site context, I also conducted several observations. These observation experiences allowed me to compare what I observed with what participants shared with me during the interviews. My four formal observation experiences included a staff meeting (90 minutes), classroom observation (50 minutes), a special education IEP team meeting with parents (55 minutes), and an orientation meeting designed for parents of prospective students (one hour). Each formal observation was planned ahead of time with staff members and the school's director. I took field notes during the observations and reviewed and typed them the same day, as recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (2011). They strongly suggest that the researcher do the following: "Get right to the task. Do not procrastinate. The more time that passes between observing and recording the notes, the poorer your recall will be" (p. 127). Predominantly, I recorded what Bogdan and Biklen describe as "descriptive field notes" (p. 120) designed to capture what occurred during the observation. This included a description of the physical setting, a reconstruction of the dialogue that took place, accounts of particular events, and a description of specific activities that took place (p. 121). I also took "reflective field notes" (p. 122), that I included when I felt that my presence as an observer may have been impacting the behaviors of those observed, or when my biases may have clouded my perspectives of what was happening

during the field experience (Peshkin, 1988). The reflective portions of my field notes were recorded in the margins in my notes and then added to the end of my typed copy.

I also gathered some useful information during informal observations. I frequently was seated in the school's lobby as I waited for interviews or scheduled observations to begin. I took notes on things such as the physical appearance of the building, the interactions among school staff and parents and how I was greeted upon entering the building. I also spent some time outside the building and observed the interaction between staff and parents in the parking lot as students were dropped off for school. Data from observations, both formal and informal, provided details and descriptions that added richness to my case study. At times, my observations led to further questions that I later presented to appropriate staff members. In the following sections, I provide a detailed account of my observation experiences.

Staff meeting. My first observation was a faculty meeting that was held prior to the beginning of the school year. The purpose for the observation was two-fold. First, I wanted to see how the staff interacted with one another and get a sense of the leadership hierarchy of the school. I also wanted to see what topics would be discussed that were relevant to the education of SWDs.

The meeting took place in a round room with no individual seats, but rather four circular tiered "steps" around the entire circumference of the room. There were doors at opposite ends of the room. The meeting was led by the school's director and her presentation was aided by a flat screen television which was linked to her computer. The general feeling of the meeting was very relaxed. While the faculty waited for the meeting to begin, they spoke casually with those seated near them. About half of the faculty members brought laptop computers.

When the meeting began, I was formally introduced as an IU doctoral student who would be conducting research at the school. Also, a new staff member who had been hired the day before was introduced. He told the staff a little about his background and his path to the school. Following introductions, the director asked for items that the faculty wanted to address during the meeting. One teacher stated that he wanted to talk about the garden, while another mentioned pictures and picture day.

Relevant to the education of SWDs, the topic of behavior management, off-task behavior in particular, was introduced. The director discussed keeping students focused on their learning agreement when they are off-task. Each student had a learning agreement that served as a "contract" of sorts and outlined the expectations of each learner. The use of proximity control was suggested in conjunction with speaking quietly with off-task students to encourage them to make the right learning choices. The director modeled this behavior in a role play with a teacher who volunteered to participate. The teacher and director played out a scenario where the student was not researching his writing topic, but rather was looking at internet sites that were unrelated to the task at hand. The director continually drew attention to the student's learning agreement and continued to encourage him to abide by the agreement. After the role play was over, teachers gave feedback regarding the scenario. One talked about how certain behaviors can be addressed within the co-teaching model. She mentioned how when teachers have taught together for a while, that they can communicate without speaking. They also can know which teachers should be paired with which student when problems arise. Many of the teachers nodded in agreement, giving me a sense that co-teaching is an instruction delivery model that is employed at the school.

Next, the director led a discussion on the need for the school staff to increase consistency with learners that are in the process of Strategic Teacher Interventions (STIs) and/or learners with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Specifically she addressed the fidelity of interventions and data collection. It was also mentioned how the special education staff can assist in data collection and Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) development in order to change student behaviors that are keeping them from learning.

Following the meeting, Nicole, the special education teacher/coordinator shook my hand and offered her support in completing my research. She was very congenial and sincere in her offer to meet with me as needed to discuss the special education services at the school.

Classroom observation. My second observation was in an inclusive classroom on a typical day. There were approximately 40 students arranged at ten tables, where three to four students were seated at each table. The instructional staff included one licensed teacher and an instructional assistant that was a substitute in place of the regular staff member. The students all were engaged in individual work, and no whole group instruction was taking place at the time of the observation. In walking around the room, I noticed that students were working on individual lessons of topics that they were interested in. One male student was working on a report about the rhinoceros, while another female student was doing a report about signs of affection (kissing, hugging, etc.). All the students were very quiet during the observation. Some students were listening to headphones and using their personal electronic devices. The teacher first greeted me at the entry of the classroom. She had no teacher desk or chair, but a standing desk/space where her laptop was set up. She asked a student in her classroom to enter data onto her computer regarding classroom attendance. The teacher then moved around the classroom, looking over student work and offering assistance to those working. After a few minutes, the teacher

approached the side of the room, picked up a hand chime and gently shook it. This was successfully used to get everyone's attention. She then made an announcement to the class regarding the individual work and directed the students' attention to an easel that had written instructions. She then exited the classroom and led me to the area outside of the classroom. The instructional assistant stayed behind as we left the room.

The classroom had no traditional door, but instead the entryway to the classroom opened into a larger commons area were several students were seated at individual tables/desks and were working on various assignments. One student was working on a jigsaw puzzle while he waited for the teacher to engage in an individual lesson with him. Another student was working on a presentation with a poster board with pictures of the student's recent camping experience pasted to it. The student was also making notes on the poster to assist with his project and its eventual presentation. When I asked the student to describe what he was working on, he said it was a presentation about a camp that he attended recently in North Carolina. The trip was not with his family but was a therapeutic experience where he went to the woods to learn survival skills with other teenagers.

After speaking with the student working on the jigsaw puzzle, the teacher informed him that it was time to go to the kitchen just outside of the commons area for his individual lesson. She asked the student, who had been diagnosed with autism and was served with an IEP, if it was okay if I observed the lesson. The student politely stated that it was okay with him and we headed to the kitchen, which was about 25-30 feet from the classroom entrance and not visible to the other students in the class. Once inside the kitchen area, which was fully equipped with a pantry, a refrigerator, cupboards, a sink, microwave and a range/oven, the teacher informed the student that he was going to use her written directions to make a simple snack/meal: a cheese

quesadilla. She asked the student several questions before beginning the lesson, “what do we do before we prepare food?” The student replied that we first get the ingredients, but the teacher corrected him and told him that we always wash our hands first. The student washed his hands in the sink and returned to the counter where the written instruction for preparing the meal was placed. The teacher asked the student to look at the instructions and begin. The student was told that he would prepare a quesadilla and asked what ingredients he would need. He stated that he would need cheese and tortillas. The teacher reminded him to get the butter as well as he headed to the refrigerator. She explained that the butter helps keep the food from sticking to the hot pan. She directed the student’s attention to the handwritten instructions and asked him to get out a pan and spatula to do the cooking. The student chose the appropriate sized skillet and a spatula to turn the food over. He placed the pan on the range and teacher questioned him on what setting the range should be set on for the cooking. They agreed on medium heat. The student got a butter knife after turning on the burner on the range. The student put butter in the pan and waited for it to melt. After the butter was melted the student placed the tortilla in the skillet and covered it with cheese.

With much prompting and modeling by the teacher throughout the process, the student successfully began to cook the quesadilla. While the tortilla was browning a female student came in to speak with the teacher about an assignment that she did not finish as promised the night before. The teacher calmly explained that the student did not live up to the deadline and discussed the consequences. I was unable to hear all of the conversation, but it appeared that the student had a set deadline for her writing assignment and would have a consequence of completing it during a preferred activity, such as lunch. The teacher returned her attention to the cooking lesson and assisted the student, hand-over-hand, to turn the tortilla over with the spatula.

He folded it over, and after a couple of attempts, flipped it over. After it was done the student used the spatula to put the finished product on his plate. He moved the skillet to a cooler part of the stove. While the snack was cooling, the student was instructed to put the food back in the refrigerator. He then returned to the plate and cut the quesadilla into pieces for consumption. The student kindly offered me a bite and I accepted. He then brought his prepared snack back out to the commons area. He was informed that he would have to complete the follow-up written assignment regarding the cooking experience. At first he did not want to not want to comply. The teacher matter-of-factly informed him that he must have it completed before he could go home that day and he stated that he would.

The teacher and I returned to the main classroom and she explained some of her classroom guides to me and how they assist her students to generate ideas for research and further study. As I observed, I could not discern any SWDs that were receiving any direct services as per an IEP. Each student seemed to be getting support when they raised their hand and asked for it. A student was outside cleaning the windows of her classroom. I asked the teacher about the student and she informed me that all students had to complete work experiences. The student was not a member of her class and was of high school age.

IEP team meeting observation. In order to examine specific special education processes and procedures, a parent granted me permission to observe their child's annual IEP team meeting. The meeting was held in a handsome conference room with plenty of space, a large circular table with ample seating for 8 or more people. I observed the proceedings from a table off to the side and was not seated with the IEP team members. During my observation, I utilized an IEP Team Meeting checklist (Appendix B) to see if required meeting and IEP components were addressed.

The meeting started five minutes late due to the parent's arrival time. The school staff present included the school's director, the child's general education teacher, the special education teacher/coordinator and a special education instructional assistant who worked with the child in the classroom. The school's special education teacher/coordinator chaired the meeting. She opened the conference proceedings by giving the parents a copy of the procedural safeguards (parent rights), the agenda for the meeting and a draft copy of the child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The parents and school staff seemed very comfortable with one another and their initial conversations seemed to indicate that they had spoken many times before on the child's behalf. The meeting agenda was reviewed and the formal meeting promptly began.

The special education coordinator began the conference with a discussion of the student's academic and social strengths as well as the student's interests. The mother shared that her child was mechanically inclined and had spatial strengths. The general education teacher commented that the child was funny, had a good sense of humor and communicated well with adults. She also commented that when focused, the student could produce some quality school work. She discussed a time when the student wrote a story for Language Arts class and stayed focused for three straight hours. After the committee finished discussing the student's strengths and interests, they moved on to the parents' concerns.

Academically, the student's mother shared that she is concerned about her grandchild's math skills and referred to math as "a struggle". The general education teacher agreed that the student's primary difficulties in the classroom setting involved math. She went on to say that abstract things were hard for the student to grasp. This led the team to a discussion about another concern, which was the student's behavior. It was reported that the student will occasionally

"shut down" when faced with a difficult task or something that doesn't seem to come easy for him. These shutdowns have required that school staff remove the student gently from the classroom, since he becomes stubborn, refuses to speak, and refuses to leave the classroom to gather himself emotionally (as he is supposed to do per his IEP). The teacher also stated that if given the choice, the student would much rather socialize than engage in school work that he does not want to do or is challenging. The special education teacher/coordinator then turned the IEP team's attention to the progress on goals section of the draft IEP. The student had met their goal in written expression, but had not yet met the goal for math.

Next, the student's present levels of academic, social/emotional and adaptive functioning were discussed. At this point, the general education teacher shared the data she had collected on the student's academic functioning. She shared the student's most recent score on the weekly writing prompt, discussed his reading level, and his current abilities in math. Again, the general education teacher's report led to discussion about the student's behavior when he is pushed too hard. The teacher mentioned the "fine line" where the student could be pushed to be challenged, but going too far frequently prompted shutdown behaviors. When the student's reading was discussed, the mother shared that her child hated to read and many times refused to do it. The mother went on to discuss that she had learned that "softer is better", when it comes to coaxing her child to do things they did not want to do. A firm stand usually promotes the shutdown/refusal behaviors. The committee discussed that, both at home and at school, the child refused to speak and had trouble calming down when overly stressed. The school's director recommended an additional assessment for expressive language that would be done by their contracted speech/language pathologist. The committee agreed to pursue the additional evaluation for language services and the parents signed the consent form. The special education

teacher/coordinator then discussed the eligibility section of the IEP and stated that the student continues to be eligible for special education services.

Prior of the committee's discussion of a behavior intervention plan (BIP), the special education coordinator discussed the student's frequent late arrivals to school. She stated that at one point, the student verbalized being able to do better at school when arriving on time. The parents brought the student to and from school each day and stated that they will try to be more consistent with the student's arrival time. The discussion of the BIP continued with a breakdown of the student's behaviors of concern, the perceived functions of those behaviors, and positive strategies and instructional experiences for the school personnel to address the behaviors of concern. Among the strategies included in the plan were breaking directions down into smaller steps, assigned seating, providing the student with written directions, and a staff member taking the time in the morning to plan out the student's day to provide structure. With regard to the refusal behaviors, a strategy was added that involved the student coming to the special education coordinator's office to de-escalate and perhaps starting the following day in her office to check their level of anxiety before re-entering the regular classroom. Because the student's behavior had improved over the years, the committee believed that the student no longer needed a crisis plan for aggressive or elopement behaviors.

Next the student's annual goals for the new IEP were adjusted, and one behavioral goal was added to enhance and monitor the student's ability to appropriately express their needs. Accommodations provided to the student included a scribe for writing, additional time on tests, and additional breaks during testing. The student was currently being provided 180 minutes of special education support per day and the committee agreed to increase the level of support to 240 minutes per day. The support was to be in the general education setting except for the

provision of testing accommodations and the services outlined in the behavior plan for shutdown behavior. Those services would be provided in a different setting but it was not mentioned where. The committee discussed the need for extended school year services and agreed that it was not needed for the student. The meeting was adjourned as the special education coordinator printed copies of the IEP for signature.

Parent orientation meeting observation. Every Wednesday at 9:00 am, the charter school conducts a parent orientation meeting for families that are interested in enrollment. I attended one of the orientation meetings to gather information on how the process may welcome or discourage parents of SWDs to enroll in the school. On the day of my observation, ten parents showed up for the orientation session. Some were couples, some were parents with friends to support them. Some of them brought children with them that could potentially be enrolled.

The meeting commenced promptly at 9:00 a.m. and was led by the parent liaison, who was also the co-founder of the school. He had arranged 11 chairs around a circular table for the parents to be seated. The children that were present sat on the parents' laps and worked puzzles or played with crayons/pencils that were provided by the school. The meeting started with a description of the Montessori methodology and how it is different from the philosophy and practices of the traditional public school. The parent liaison discussed the use of manipulatives as a learning tool in the early and middle grades, and explained other Montessori features such as hands on and self-paced learning, mixed-age classrooms, a de-emphasis of traditional grading. Perhaps most emphasized, was the school's philosophy of allowing students to follow their interests as they learn. A heavy emphasis was placed on individual responsibility, initiative and self-discipline.

The above discussion was followed by two brief video presentations. The first was a video directly comparing the Montessori Method with the offerings at the traditional public school. The main idea of the video was that Montessori education is better suited to keep learners engaged in their studies and that traditional public schools settle on coercion (grades, high stakes testing results, detentions, after school programs, etc.) to engage students. The second video was specific to the school itself, and was a series of photographs streamed with an engaging musical selection. The video showcased students and staff engaged in different school-based activities, from classroom/lab setting, to the annual camping trip in the fall. The students and staff in much of the video were using American Sign symbols to "sing" the lyrics of the song that was playing.

Following the video presentation, the parent liaison asked that each parent offer one adjective that they would like to describe their child when they were adults. Descriptions such as creative, inventive, passionate, happy, artistic were shared by the parents. The presenter then asked the parents to remember that word as they participated in the rest of the orientation meeting and subsequent school tour. A main emphasis of the remaining presentation was to differentiate a Montessori school from traditional public education. Paramount was the grade configurations of the school. Rather than K-12, the levels were broken out by age group: 6-9, 9-12, 12-14, and 14-18 year olds. The perceived benefits of such a configuration were shared as teachers getting to know their students over a span of three years and older learners assisting younger learners with classroom routines and learning.

A school tour followed and several of my observations were noteworthy. First, as we observed classrooms, I was not able to differentiate between SWDs and non-disabled peers. The observed learning sessions were active, and student driven. Teachers and staff were there to assist the learning, not direct it. At the beginning of the tour, the leader apologized to the parents

in attendance. He lamented that for all his talk about the de-emphasis of testing in the school, the tour would reveal some grade levels engaged in state testing, a mandate for all public schools, including charters. The leader at one point stopped, and asked the participants if they once heard a teacher's voice above the chatter of the learners. His point being that the learners are driving the learning experiences, not the adults. The tour ended in the school's main lobby. The parent liaison then spoke about the lottery process for getting into the school and where the attendees could find more information about the process.

Interviews. Interview guides were designed to address the research questions rather than specific, uniformly executed questions. This allowed for freer conversations and exploration of meaning during the interview process. As noted by Bogdan and Biklen (2011), if the interviewer is too rigid in controlling the content of the interview and the subject is unable to express themselves freely, the interview "falls out of the qualitative range" (p. 104). Gubrium and Holstein (2003) encouraged researchers to empower the respondent during interviews to provide space for the respondent's story to be heard. The interview guide approach is described by Patton (2002) as one where topics and issues discussed will be specified in advance in outline form, but the interviewer decides the sequence and wording of the questions during the course of the interview. The interview guides used in my study were specific to the group I was interviewing (parent, student, or staff member). My choice of using an interview guide allowed data collection to be somewhat systematic for each respondent. Probes were used to elicit greater detail and information from each participant. Probes are one strategy to encourage the participant to describe what he or she experiences in greater detail (deMarris, 2004). My interview guides were designed to allow for participants to express themselves freely. In particular, the parents I interviewed offered a great level of detail regarding their child's educational history. In both

cases, this consisted of comparisons of how they were treated in the regular public school and how they were treated at Montessori Village.

Each interview was conducted at the school in the conference room or the special education coordinator's office. Detailed information from the interviews, including important quotes, is presented in Chapter Four.

Review of the school's data. The charter school's demographic data, provided by the state department of education, was analyzed for enrollment trends, performance on state assessments, and percentage of SWDs enrolled at the school. In-house data, such as information provided on the school's website, plans for professional development, and the Family Handbook were used to provide contextual information that illuminated the school's intent and ability to meet the needs of SWDs.

V. Data Collection Instruments

Because I was the main data collection instrument, I made efforts to stay aware of my own subjective state that could influence every phase of my research. Peshkin (1988) describes one's own subjectivity as "an amalgam of the persuasions that stem from the circumstances of one's class, statuses, and values interacting with the particulars of one's object of investigation" (p. 17). Referring to the subjectivity of researchers, Peshkin advocates an elevated state of awareness that stems from monitoring of oneself as the researcher. I was aware that my professional role as a special education director could influence my perceptions. Using reflective notes was an effort to be aware of what was happening with my own subjectivity. Bogdan and Biklen (2011), described reflective field notes as comments that present the researcher's subjective analysis of what is happening during the observation, such as their feelings, hunches, and prejudices. A simple writing pad and pen or pencil was used in recording all field notes.

However, as mentioned above in my description of the IEP team meeting observation, I used a specific checklist (Appendix B) to see if required components of the team meeting were addressed as per IDEA (Yell, 2016).

As mentioned above, interview guides were used to frame the conversations between myself, school staff, administrators, parents, and students (Appendix A). Each interview guide was developed for each group of participants and questions were differentiated as appropriate. Probes were used to encourage interview participants to clarify meanings and to elaborate on their perceptions. All interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder, saved as an audio file on a computer and then transcribed.

VI. Data Analysis and Procedures

Along with interview transcriptions, field notes from observations were typed. They included my personal comments and perceptions. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, including introductory conversations prior to the formal interview. This allowed me to relive the "feel" of the interview and judge the comfort level of the participant as I analyzed the data.

Interview transcripts were read and analyzed three separate times. On the first reading I looked for errors in the transcript and when I found them, I listened to the audio tape and made necessary corrections. Following the first reading, I also added notes that included my thoughts about what I was learning as I reviewed the transcript, and what themes were beginning to emerge. I also made notes on the right hand margin where follow-up questions were necessary. These notes were added at the end of each transcript in the form of a summary that described the interview experience and my reflections upon it. I also considered my own subjectivity as suggested by Peshkin (1988) to examine what biases I may have held as the interview unfolded

or as I reviewed the transcript. I made a conscious effort to always be aware of my professional status as a special education director. This was particularly true when my thoughts turned to whether or not, from *my* perspective, SWDs were being served legally and ethically at the charter school.

My second reading of the transcripts was specifically for the purpose of finding comments made by the participants that were highly salient with regard to my research questions. The most relevant participant quotes were highlighted in green on the transcript and a good portion of these highlighted comments are included in Chapter Four. After highlighting important quotes from the participants, a third transcript review was done. The purpose of this review was to categorize participant comments into the themes. To do this, I developed a coding system (Bogdan & Biklen, 2011) where I highlighted key meanings and phrases that were provided by interview participants in response to my questions. I then looked for patterns and regularities that arose while participants addressed my research questions. This process was inductive in nature. Meanings and themes began to emerge as I reviewed interview transcripts and observation notes. As described by Kisely and Kendall (2011),

> Qualitative research relies on data collected from interviews (semi-structured or unstructured), focus groups, observations, or documents and other written materials. Data analysis is largely inductive, allowing meaning to emerge from the data, rather than the more hypothetical-deductive approach of quantitative research.

For instance, when participants were asked how the Montessori model aligns with successful performance on state testing, participants used phrases that indicated the staff did not prioritize standardized testing. For example, I highlighted phrases such as “like oil and water” and “we don’t think that’s what young people need”, or test scores “don’t define” students

academically. I found a high level of agreement across interview groups regarding the school's attitude toward state-mandated testing performance. The school's perspective on this topic, which I titled a *De-emphasis of state mandated testing,* became one of my five *coding categories* (Bogdan & Biklen, 2011, p. 173). The other categories were developed in the same way, where I looked for patterns and phrases that were used by participants to address my questions. When significant patterns emerged, I developed a category. Once the categories had presented themselves, I went back and highlighted phrases and excerpts in the transcripts using a different color for each coding category. This provided easy, visual reference for me as I set out to organize and discuss my findings. These categories included:

- Stakeholder confidence in services for SWDs
- De-emphasis of state mandated testing
- Prioritization of community and communication
- Current inability to serve students with significant disabilities
- Full inclusion model.

Bogdan and Biklen (2011) also recommend developing "families" (p. 175) of codes as an additional step to organizing qualitative data. Since the amount of data I was organizing was relatively small it was not necessary for me to develop families. Most of my coding categories fell under only one of the broad *families* suggested by Bogdan and Biklen: *Perspectives Held by Subjects* (p. 175).

The code categories that were extracted from the interview data were also used to organize findings from the observations. Since I was using my observations as a way to fortify my findings from interviews, I looked for evidence in my field notes that supported, or did not support, the categories that emerged from interview data. I color coded portions of the notes

where I observed something that addressed interview themes. For instance, the code category/theme of *Full inclusion model* was somewhat challenged by my classroom observation. My field notes reflected that one SWD was seated outside the regular classroom working on a jigsaw puzzle. He did not appear to be *included* in the regular classroom. This prompted me to question the special education coordinator about their devotion to the inclusive model. I spoke with the coordinator about what I had observed. She informed me that the student struggled with some sensory issues and that he preferred to have a little bit more space than was available in the regular classroom. The school staff encouraged the student each day to be seated in the regular classroom with only moderate success. The student is permitted to sit in the area in which he is most comfortable. The physical structure of the classrooms at the school allowed him to be separate and have his space and still be supervised by the teacher. For the most part, the codes that emerged in my transcript reviews were supported by what was recorded in my observation field notes.

VII. Research Quality

Mertens (2010) provided a list of criteria for judging the quality of qualitative research. Specifically, Mertens mentions research criteria such as credibility, transferability, and confirmability. These research qualities, according to Mertens, parallel more recognizable research quality terms such as internal validity, external validity, and objectivity. Along with an explanation of these qualitative research criteria are some recommended practices to enhance the quality of research. My use of several of these practices during the course of my research is described in the subsections that follow.

Credibility. Specifically, *member checks* and *triangulation* (Mertens, 2010) were used as a means to address credibility concerns. Member checks involve seeking verification with

research participants with regard to the data that were collected by the researcher. For my research, this meant allowing my seven interview participants to review transcripts. Following all of my interviews, each participant was emailed a copy of their interview transcript for review. They were asked to read the transcript and report any problems or issues with the content. Only two interview participants opted to review the transcripts and provided me with feedback. Only minor concerns were mentioned about typographical errors that occurred during transcription. Although not specified by Mertens, it seems plausible that this strategy would make participants feel at ease with their part in the study and make them feel confident that their comments were recorded accurately.

Triangulation involves "checking information that has been collected from different sources or methods for consistency of evidence across sources of data" (Mertens, p. 258). Using my observation data, interview data, and review of school documents, such as the school's Family Handbook, I was able to successfully triangulate several findings. For instance, interview participants consistently reported a reluctance to accept standardized test scores as a measurement of true student learning. For this reason, preparing for success on state mandated testing was not an integral part of the curriculum. Aligning with this philosophy, information provided on the state website revealed that for the past several years the charter school's performance on state tests was lower when compared to other local, regular school districts. Also, in one of my observations, a school staff member discussed the lack of emphasis on standardized tests as a means to measure student learning at the school. Another example was the evidence that I found regarding the school's services for SWDs being nearly 100% in the general education classroom. There were no designated special education classrooms in my observations.

All interview participants reported that services for SWDs were provided in general education classrooms.

Transferability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described transferability as a concept that allows readers of research to make comparisons of the research site to their own setting. Mertens discussed two practices to address transferability in a study's findings: "Thick Description and Multiple Cases" (p. 259). Since I chose to engage in a case study of only one charter school, the multiple case practice was not a viable tool to address the quality of my study. Rather, I attempted in my observations to provide detailed descriptions of contextual factors that were important. I made a strong effort to capture the *context* within my observation findings. My observations were intended to tie together interview data to reveal a picture of what was happening at the school during my study. For instance, in discussion of my findings, I provided a detailed description of my observation of a parent orientation meeting at the school. The intent of the description was to provide readers with a "feel" of the enthusiasm the school staff had for their educational philosophy and the effort they put into sharing their message to prospective families who are seeking to enroll. This enthusiasm was also evidenced in my interviews with staff members. It was my hope that such detail would allow readers to make better comparisons between their own settings and my research site.

Confirmability. According to Mertens, confirmability means that "the data and their interpretation are not figments of the researcher's imagination" (p. 260). To address confirmability as a means to enhance research quality, Mertens recommended a confirmability audit and a "chain of evidence" (p. 256). A confirmability audit involves sharing qualitative data with a fellow researcher to see if their interpretations align with that of the primary data collector. Some of my research data were reviewed by a colleague for this very purpose. I asked

a fellow Ed.D. cohort member to read one transcript from each of my interview groups (staff, parent, student) and to jot down his perceptions of the meaning of the comments within. We later met to compare notes on what I perceived in meaning of participant comments and what he interpreted was revealed in the interview transcript. His notes from the reading of the transcripts yielded a high level of consistency with my own transcript reviews. My colleague did question whether one of the parents interviewed adequately understood one of my questions. He pointed out that several participants did not seem to be able to adequately answer what training school staff might need to better meet the needs of SWDs.

To further address confirmability of a case study, Yin (2009) suggests maintaining a research protocol that details each step in the research process. The process in which I engaged, from gaining site access to analyzing my collected data was representative of a detailed protocol. One example was my systematic analysis of interview transcripts. Each transcript underwent three separate reviews or readings. Each of the reviews had a separate purpose and the date and time of the analysis was recorded at the end of the transcript.

VIII. Methodological Limitations and Strengths

My case study approach had several limitations that should be addressed. First, the interview participants that were selected were provided to me by the school's director. It is possible that she only selected school stakeholders that were advocates for the school and its mission. This would mean that those interviewed would likely respond to questions in a way that held the school in a favorable light. Next, the number of participants that engaged in the interview was limited (seven). Additional members from each participant group may have provided more extensive data. Also, follow-up interviews might have provided clarity to the perspectives of individuals that participated in the study. Likewise, additional classroom

observations would have possibly illuminated in greater detail the services provided for SWDs at Montessori Village. Further, by studying only one charter school, my study has limited utility for making generalizations about the perceptions of staff, parents and students in other charter schools. In other words, my research will not be useful to inform readers how charter schools, in general, serve their SWDs. However, the intent of my study was to examine the perceptions of individuals within a unique setting. Generalizations of this study may be limited to the reader's ability to apply my findings to their own settings. Also, follow-up interviews might have provided more in-depth findings. Multiple classroom observations in particular might have added richness and additional contextual factors to my research. Further, in analyzing my field notes and interview transcripts, it may have been beneficial to have additional colleagues to code the data. This would reinforce the credibility of my findings.

By studying only one charter school, my ability to assert that one charter school model is better suited than another to effectively serve SWDs is rather limited. Indeed, the Montessori philosophy is in many ways aligned with special education practices (Cossentino, 2010). This may give the school an advantage in serving their SWDs when compared to another charter school with a different curricular focus. When I began designing my study, my intention was not to study how special education is provided in the Montessori model. However, as my study continued, I realized that the school's unique approach did affect how special education was provided.

Overall, the methods I selected for my study yielded useful data to answer my research questions. Sharing my study's purpose, ensuring anonymity, and taking time to speak with participants *prior to* formal field experiences, made participants comfortable. All seemed very engaged in the process and seemed to be proud to be part of their school community. I was

welcomed at the school and given access to observation sites without reservation from the school staff. The research quality practices in which I engaged, such as member checks, confirmability audits, and following detailed research protocols gave me confidence that my study's findings were valid.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter includes the findings of my study and seeks to address the overarching research questions, which are as follows:

1.) What are the perceptions of charter school administrators, staff, parents, and students regarding their school's abilities to serve SWDs in compliance with the main principles of IDEA?

2.) In what ways do the school's mission, curricular design, and physical structure enhance or inhibit efforts to meet the needs of SWDs?

3.) What training, resources, and expertise do the study participants perceive as needed to effectively serve students with special needs in the charter school setting?

I begin with a description of the school, the staff, and the student body. The information was drawn from the state department of education and the school's website, which included the school's Family Handbook. Within the school description, I inform the reader of what makes this charter school different from regular public schools in the way of curricular offerings, mission and philosophy.

In the sections that follow, data collected from observations and the interviews with parents, students, and staff members have been organized into themes. Each theme is detailed and supported by direct observations and actual comments that were shared during the interview process. The data collected, and the respective themes that were generated serve as the study's foundation in answering the research questions. As expected, each interview participant group (parent, staff, and student) had varying levels of knowledge about IDEA and the school's efforts to meet its requirements.

I. Research Site: Montessori Village Charter School

The site chosen for my study was Montessori Village Charter School, located in the Midwestern United States. Their website, which I was told was designed and maintained by the school staff, was attractive and provided a great deal of information about the school. The website was used to provide information to currently enrolled students and families as well as those who may be interested in enrolling. A link on the website brought visitors to the 2015-2016 Family Handbook. In the handbook, the school's mission was clearly articulated. It included an emphasis on respecting all learners and ideas, strong school/home relationships, cooperative learning, having fun, and using knowledge to positively impact the community. The information provided on the website emphasized how the school is *different* from regular public schools.

Unlike most public schools, Montessori Village grouped students by developmental age, rather than grade level. Collaborative classrooms, or *studios* as they were referred to by the school staff, were offered for students aged 3-6 in the Early Education program, ages 6-12 were served in the Elementary program (broken into two programs: 6-9 and 9-12), and ages 12-18 were placed in the Teen program. Having a wider age span of learners at each level allowed for older, more experienced learners to provide support to the younger learners. The age configurations aligned with the school's philosophy of community learning. Students, or *learners* as they were called at Montessori Village, were supported by three or four licensed teachers in each program. The teachers collaborated on curriculum and designed instructional experiences for the learners. Students with special needs were supported almost exclusively in the general education classroom and were supported by paraprofessionals called *developmental specialists.* The developmental specialists reported directly to the school's special education

coordinator to ensure that students were being provided the services and accommodations as per their IEP.

Montessori Village uses the Montessori sequence and materials/manipulatives to enhance learning for not only the younger children, but for middle grade students as well. Students were encouraged to *play* with learning materials in which they were interested and guide their own learning experiences while being supported by their teachers, or *advisors*. Students were expected to take responsibility for their learning via making choices on how they want to learn academic concepts, and at what pace. The focus was on each learner making individual progress, not on having each child meet a set of grade level standards by the end of each school year.

State Data Profile. According to the state department of education, the Montessori Village's enrollment for the 2014-15 school year, in grades K-12, was 545. Of those students, 87.2% were White, 6.2% were Multi-Racial, 3.5% were Hispanic, 1.7% were Asian, 1.3% were African American, and .2% were Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. About 29% of the students received free and/or reduced lunch. The English Language Learner population made up only .4% of the school's K-12 enrollment. Each year over the span of the last decade, enrollment has increased. The table below shows how Montessori Village compared to the state and neighboring school districts on accountability measures. Montessori Village served a higher percentage of special education students (19.6%) than the state average (14.9%) and that of four neighboring regular public school districts (14.9-17.7%). The school was behind the state averages in all areas of performance other than graduation rate. Montessori Village earned a 100% graduation rate for SWDs, but fell short of the state averages for percent passing graduation exams and state exams for grades 3-8.

Data (all from 2013-14 school year)	State	Corp A	Corp B	Corp C	Corp D	**Montessori Village**
% Special Ed.	14.9	16.3	16	17.7	16.4	***19.6***
State Exam (grades 3-8, % passing both ELA/Math)	74.7	68.8	77.3	86.6	79.2	***52.7***
% special ed. passing grade 3-8 assessment	41.6	34.6	44.5	58.8	40.9	***33.3***
% passing both portions of graduation exam	65.4	64.9	68	72.5	72.2	***39.1***
% special ed. passing both portions of graduation exam	32	24.7	24.7	42.9	39.1	***30.8***
Grad. Rate (% of 4 year cohort)	88.9	94.5	96.8	97	94.5	***100***
% special ed. graduating	74.7	83	90	88.2	87.9	***100***

Special education services at Montessori Village. According to the school's Family Handbook, SWDs are served with licensed special education staff, a speech/language pathologist, an occupational therapist, a physical therapist, and a licensed school psychologist. These services are either provided by school personnel or are contracted with outside agencies. The parent handbook also outlined the process for special education referral, pre-referral interventions, and testing for special education eligibility. As I previously mentioned, SWDs were predominantly served in the regular classroom. However, students were served in smaller group settings as needed for behavioral management, intensive academic support, and provision of testing accommodations. Removing students with IEPs from the regular classroom was a strategy that was used sparingly because of the potential of making the student feel *different*.

This sentiment was shared in the Family Handbook in the section addressing exceptional learners.

According to the state department of education and reports from school staff during interviews, Montessori Village has only one staff member who is licensed to serve as a special education teacher. This licensed staff member worked collaboratively with school administration to coordinate services for all SWDs. During our interview, she stated that she provided no direct classroom instruction but did provide behavioral and academic support to students on an as needed basis. The special education coordinator served as the Teacher of Record (TOR) for all 107 special education students. The school's director shares some of the special education administrative duties with regard to state reporting, addressing formal complaints, mediation, and due process. The school's director also served as Public Agency Representative at IEP meetings.

Montessori Village's model for serving SWDs was discussed extensively during my interviews with school staff, parents, and students. Participant responses, along with the observations within the school setting served as an effective means of answering the three research questions. Certain themes emerged when I reviewed interview transcripts and observation field notes. Those themes are discussed below.

II. Themes from Interviews and Observations

My study of Montessori Village included seven interviews, and four formal observations. Three school staff members agreed to participate in the interview process, as well as two parents and two students who were seniors graduating in the spring. The students who agreed to participate were served with IEPs and were at least 18 years of age. They *were not* the offspring of the parents interviewed. The students were also expected to meet all state requirements for a high school diploma and were expected to live independently as adults. It should be noted that

both students asked for interview questions to be provided before their interview and I granted this request.

Below is a brief description of each interview participant, starting with the school staff. Pseudonyms were used for each participant and the name of the school.

Brenda: Brenda was the school's director and top level administrator. She started the school with her husband in 1998. The major impetus behind the founding of the school was their dissatisfaction with their children's experiences in regular public education. The founders of the school did not feel that the regular public schools fostered the creativity within their children and did not challenge them academically. Their children were not in special education.

Nicole: Nicole was the school's special education coordinator, but was not licensed as an administrator. She served as TOR for all special education students at the school. She chaired all IEP team meetings with parents and students and assigned duties to special education paraprofessionals who work with the students in the general education setting. All three of Nicole's children attend the school.

Erica: Erica was a classroom teacher in the teen program who provided direct instruction to special education students who had been placed in her studio along with her general education students.

Melissa: Melissa was a parent of two special education students who attended Montessori Village. She sought a school for her children where they could move freely as they learned and not be confined to sitting at a desk for long periods of time.

Kathy: Kathy was a parent of a student with autism and a central auditory processing disorder. She came to Montessori Village after unsatisfactory experiences in regular public schools that revolved around her child's need for special education services and the former school's

reluctance to provide them. Kathy worked as a paraprofessional at Montessori Village but was interviewed based on her status as a parent.

Grant: Grant was a senior at Montessori Village and spoke highly of his experience at the school. He seemed very outgoing, articulate, and enthusiastic about his education. He shared that he was dissatisfied with this experiences in regular public schools prior to his enrollment at Montessori Village.

Alan: Alan was a student who had been diagnosed with autism and had formerly received speech services. He spoke candidly about his experiences at Montessori Village and his former regular public school. It is important to note that the two students interviewed were *not* the offspring of the parents that were interviewed.

The interviews were supplemented with four formal observations that included an observation of an inclusive classroom taught by Erica, an all staff meeting prior to the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year, a special education IEP team meeting, and a parent orientation meeting designed for families considering enrollment at Montessori Village. Common themes from the interviews and observations are listed below and will be described in subsequent sections:

- Stakeholder confidence in services for SWDs
- De-emphasis of state mandated testing student
- Prioritization of community and communication
- Current inability to serve students with significant disabilities
- Full inclusion model

Stakeholder confidence in services for SWDs. The comments from the interview participants indicated that Montessori Village was committed to the inclusion of SWDs in the

general education setting. Individualized instruction and a focus on student strengths and interests were a common theme among all interviewees. Most of the parents and students had direct experience with regular public schools. They compared their experiences with regular public schools to their experiences at Montessori Village during the interviews. These comparisons came with no prompting from me. School staff members who were interviewed also made such comparisons.

Interview participants, particularly parents, valued the ability of students to move freely in the classroom as they learned at their own pace. The individualized approach to learning offered at the school was emphasized. Kathy, a parent of a SWD at Montessori Village addressed the individualized approach the school employs.

> I would say that there's a huge emphasis on the learners as an individual. Teachers care very much. I guess I see it in the teen's program because we have seniors that are graduating and moving on to different opportunities after high school. There's so much attention to each person and there's such a spectrum of interests and goals for each kid or teen. There's no box that they're all put in. Yeah, individuality is embraced.

School personnel also discussed how the Montessori model is well suited to individualized instruction. Brenda, the school's director, discussed the individualization of the Montessori curriculum and also made direct comparisons to her perception of the regular public school model.

> I think some families feel rigidity in a regular program, that there's not much flexibility... That makes them really interested because of the personalization of the curriculum, and so forth. The structure is different. You're not listening to a person talk a lot. Everyone's not doing the same thing, so there's a differentiation part that's just built into the process,

> and especially for the younger families. I think they really appreciate the materials and that curriculum over worksheet mentality.

Both students reported that the self-paced curriculum and inclusive environment was appealing to them. Both favored their current setting over the regular public school that they previously attended. They liked being at Montessori Village where they could work at their own pace and pursue their own interests within the curriculum. Both students reported that at their former schools, they were pulled from the general education setting too often, or that when they did need help, it was not enough. Both reported having multiple staff members to work with when they needed help in their current setting. They liked being included with their classmates to the fullest extent possible. Alan, a student with autism, used a unique metaphor to compare Montessori Village with his former, regular public school.

> I would think this school was better because in that school [his former school], it felt like they thought that I did not have any legs. I needed to go out of the classroom almost all the time working on different material that they worked on in the classroom.

I asked Alan specifically what he meant by the comment about his legs. He stated that, "It meant that they thought I was more disabled than I actually was." Alan went on to report that at his former school, when he was pulled out of his regular classroom, the work he was given was too easy for him. He reported feeling more connected with his peers and learning more when he was being taught in the regular classroom. Parents also shared this perception, that they and their children preferred the regular classroom setting.

Melanie, a parent of two special needs students who attended Montessori Village, reported that the inclusive setting at Montessori Village was appealing to her and her children. She reported being happy that her children weren't pulled out of their regular classroom setting

to receive special education services. Melanie also shared that the amount of movement allowed in the classrooms was important for one of her daughters who has been diagnosed with attention deficit, hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Kathy also noted that the freedom of movement allowed in the Montessori setting was appealing to her. She stated that her son, who has been diagnosed with autism and an auditory processing disorder, needed movement while he processed information. He also responded well to the use of manipulatives that were incorporated into the Montessori curriculum. Prior to coming to Montessori Village, her son struggled in the regular public school setting. Kathy's experience with the regular public school setting was problematic and she reported her son's emotional well-being as an important piece of why she chose to enroll at Montessori Village.

> When you have a son that comes home and says that he hates school every day and doesn't want to go and he's a straight 'A' student... if he comes home crying and upset every day then I don't care that he's making As. I wanted to find an atmosphere at a school that was safe for him and comfortable.

Kathy also described a great deal of difficulty getting her son evaluated for special education services while in the regular public school setting. She reported resistance when she asked for a special education evaluation. In fact, it was not until her son failed the state mandated assessment in 3rd grade that the school agreed to evaluate for special education services. And even then, the evaluation took a long time to get underway and she wanted things to happen a little sooner. According to Kathy, her son became more and more dissatisfied at school and she became concerned about his emotional well-being, prompting her to seek enrollment elsewhere. Kathy claimed to be much more satisfied with the treatment she received at Montessori Village and the concern and respect they showed for her son was "comforting". Her son was evaluated

for special education services and an IEP was developed for him in a timely manner. She had high praise for the special education personnel at Montessori Village as well as their entire school community.

The staff's perception of the services for SWDs at Montessori Village as being appropriate and adequate was supported by my observation data. The staff meeting at the beginning of the year included a discussion about school-wide goals, one of which was the fidelity of services for those students in the pre-referral process as well as for students with IEP and/or behavior intervention plans. The classroom observation also gave me a sense that SWDs are receiving services as per their IEP. During this observation, Erica, a classroom advisor, spent a good deal of time with one special education student with a very deliberate, one-on-one mini lesson on life skills.

Although no direct mention was made of serving SWDs during the parent orientation meeting, the parent liaison discussed the use of manipulatives as a learning tool in the early and middle grades. He also explained other Montessori features such as hands-on and self-paced learning, mixed-age classrooms, a de-emphasis of regular grading, homework, or tests, and seeing the big picture of learning, rather than acquiring random sets of skills that are taught in isolation. The parent liaison's comments about the Montessori Method seemed to align with the individualized approach that is a key component of special education (Cossentino, 2010).

Although staff, parents, and students seemed satisfied with the special education programs at Montessori Village, Nicole, the special education coordinator, reported some concerns. She felt some tension between the Montessori model and the expectations that come with IDEA compliance. When asked about training that the school staff needs to improve their special education services, Nicole shared that she wished the staff knew the process of special

education better and understood her role regarding IDEA compliance. According to Nicole, rigid rules and laws with regard to serving SWDs is "just not their world", when referring to the school staff. Nicole also shared that she looks at data and compares how her special education students perform on state tests as compared to local, regular public school students. She felt that her students are learning more, and feel better about themselves, even though their performance on high stakes tests is not at the level where she would like.

It is important to note that at the time of my study, Montessori Village's staff was taking steps to address their limitations with regard to meeting the needs of all SWDs. First, one additional staff member was working toward certification and state licensure to teach special education. This would reduce Nicole's caseload, who was the only one with a special education teaching license. Also, Nicole and some of her special education staff had arranged to visit other school districts to observe classrooms for more severely disabled students. Specifically they visited self-contained classroom settings for students with significant cognitive and/or physical disabilities. This indicated to me that they recognized the need to offer a broader range of placements and services at Montessori Village and wanted to be prepared for any student who may enroll.

Most of the interview participants were not overly concerned about state assessments for accountability. School staff members were concerned with the consequences of not meeting standards on state testing, but not enough to migrate away from Montessori practices.

De-emphasis on state mandated testing. The second theme that arose relates to the current focus on accountability and testing. When study participants were asked about accountability assessments mandated by the state, there was very little concern about their students' performance. In some cases there was disdain and ethical questions raised about

forcing students to take tests that put them under stress and measured little in the way of what the school staff, students and parents feel is true learning. In fact, during an observation of an IEP team meeting, when the subject of state mandated student testing was discussed, the parents chose to *opt out* of the testing process. The discussion continued and the committee agreed that the student would stay at home during the designated assessment days. Also, during the parent orientation meeting that included a tour of the school, the tour leader apologized because attendees would be observing some students "taking state tests". This would not, according to the tour leader, give the attendees a feel of a *typical* school day at Montessori Village.

School staff placed little emphasis on the state testing, but did incorporate state standards into their lesson planning because they felt a responsibility to the students and their families to prepare students to pass graduation exams. Erica, a classroom teacher in the teen program, shared that in math students are taught to think analytically to help them perform on tests, but everything else was cross-curricular in nature and not taught with testing performance in mind. Brenda, the school's director, provided this response when asked if the Montessori Model promotes high achievement on state test scores…

> Absolutely not; I think it's like oil and water, because when you have an individualized, reflective process that focuses on long-term thinking, and critical thinking, and problem solving, it's the opposite of what's needed to that drill and kill approach that's tested.

Brenda went on to say that she does feel some pressure to increase student performance on state tests. She mentioned at the school staff meeting and during our interview that her school had lost a great deal of state funding for a building project due to Montessori Village's test scores. However, she feels the school's mission and purpose might be jeopardized if they over-

emphasize the results of test scores. She also felt that the whole accountability movement in her state was detrimental to kids.

> Every one of our teachers, we talk about this, we know what we have to do to raise test scores. We choose not to do it, because we don't think that's what young people need, and when people talk about Montessori, or even charter schools, are an experiment, I say, Wow… I think what we're doing right now to kids is the worst experiment. We don't know the long term effect of this third grader that's been retained (due to test scores)...

Nicole shared that the school staff "hates" the required state testing, but understands, as Erica does, that the graduation exam is necessary for their students to finish high school. She also shared that the school staff must address test scores because showing improvement is part of their charter agreement with the state sponsor. Nicole mentioned that she believed funding was tied to test scores as well. The school staff does put in place interventions for students who do not pass state testing from 3rd grade (when state testing starts) through high school. Nicole articulated her belief about test scores by saying, "if a kiddo doesn't pass a test, it's not indicative of what they are able to do." Kathy stated that she has never been disappointed on her child's performance on state tests, because she doesn't believe that tests measure true ability, "it doesn't define them and it doesn't make or break them in a certain area." Melanie seemed to sum up the parents' and school staff's feelings toward state testing with the following statement…

> I know that they do their best to teach the kids what they need to learn when it comes to those tests while still trying to work within the Montessori philosophies. I personally don't put that much of an emphasis on those tests. I think it's important to know where the kids are, I just don't feel like it should be detrimental to the schools when scores come back, especially in the Montessori setting because the philosophy is different.

Like Brenda, the school's director, other school staff members did share that they were aware of, and concerned about, consequences with regard to state and federal accountability. Nicole fears the school losing its charter. This would impact her on both a personal and professional level. She informed me that her three children attend the school *and* that she would lose her job. Erica, the classroom teacher, was most concerned about being forced to implement a regimented curriculum as a result of state intervention due to test scores. She stated that if she had to implement a canned curriculum mandated by the state, she would no longer be willing to teach in such an environment.

> So yeah, of course I know that there's a responsibility. I owe a responsibility to learners, and I owe responsibility to their parents to make sure that I cover a broad range of things… that's my big fear; that we don't pass so much that they step in and say, 'You have to do it this way in order to meet expectations', and I … that is just something I couldn't personally get my head around.

Erica feels that a movement away from the Montessori Model, toward an accountability oriented curriculum would stand in the way of her building relationships with learners and, she said, "at that point I don't want to teach anymore." Indeed, all of the interview participants commented about the enhanced relationships with students and families at Montessori Charter in order to support student learning.

Prioritization of community and communication. The student responses during interviews indicated that the school puts a high priority on relationships. In fact, each interview group made direct, positive comments about communication and community building at the school. As described in the school's mission, partnerships with families and with the larger

community are considered essential for success. The stakeholders placed a high value on cooperative learning among the students.

Both students discussed assisting, and getting assistance from, other students during the educational process. For Alan, it was not only school staff that he has turned to when needing assistance with academics, but other students. Alan shared the name of a student he can go to when he needs help in Algebra and said, "He is very smart and knows a lot of math."

Grant, another student, discussed the *Assist Team*, which was a suicide prevention group. They got together in the evenings to watch movies, or engage in other group activities. The main goal of the group was to simply let students know that there are others to talk to, reach out to, when they are feeling depressed or stressed out. In short, Grant explained that the older learners at the school were utilized to serve as mentors and a support system for all learners, especially younger ones. Grant explained these mentoring activities and the Assist program as "a best friend kind of thing."

The school staff also expressed the need for a family/community approach to learning and schooling. Erica felt that the staff at Montessori Village was "more approachable" than in regular public schools. She mentioned always making the time to chat about whatever circumstances the family might be facing. She believes that families find it appealing to be part of a learning community, where their input is valued and their voices are heard.

The community piece was mentioned over and over by the school staff, within various contexts. For instance, where Erica mentions building relationships for comfort, Brenda, the school's director, talks about the need for the community piece to directly support learning. She stated that some parents feel a little intimidated by the school staff's communication habits. Brenda said that they would not allow parents to be "passive participants" in their child's

education. Nicole reinforced Brenda's comments when she shared that if a student was not successful at the charter school, she felt that it was because the family didn't completely buy into the school's philosophy.

In my interview and follow-up discussions with Brenda, the school's director, she mentioned only one instance of a family not buying into the school's philosophy. Brenda described the scenario in this way:

> They really took them out of the other setting (regular public school), because they didn't want the self-contained classroom, or they didn't feel like they were treated nice, or whatever. They didn't really want this philosophy, either. They wanted more structure, or rigidity, and so I think that part makes it difficult.

Montessori Village was "such a different environment" than what some parents had previously experienced. She mentioned how hard the school staff worked to make each learner a part of "our community".

The parents were positive about the community piece in their interview comments as well. Melanie stated that she felt that at any time she could speak with her children's teachers about any concerns that she had. "If you have any issues or concerns, go to your teacher, talk to the teachers. They will work with you" she said. Melanie went on to say that she feels like the teachers at the Montessori school take the time to build relationships with the learners and parents. Kathy shared with me that when they came to Montessori Village there was no "predisposition" to her son and he was treated with respect and welcomed.

> He wasn't ordered around the classroom and he wasn't looked at with disappointment and frustration that I know he had been addressed with at the (regular) public school.

> Eventually, he felt better about himself and about school. The whole process coming here was 180 degrees different. It was comforting.

Upon her first meeting with the staff, Kathy said it was very relaxed and low key. She was impressed with everyone's sincerity and never got the sense that the staff was too busy to listen to her. She said that anytime that she had a concern or a question it was "met with sincerity".

My observations, both formal and informal, reinforced the comments of those interviewed. The faculty meeting that I observed, prior to the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year served as a good example. During the meeting, Brenda led an engaging discussion with the staff about building trust with their learners. She believed that trust was a key learning leverage tool, and without it, it was difficult to have learners reach their potential. Many of the staff members nodded in agreement with this concept. A whole group discussion followed about strategies that staff members used to build trust with their learners. Several teachers shared their strategies with the group.

- Have conversations with students away from the studio setting, such as at outside time (recess)
- Eating lunch with individual students, or making time to speak with them about their outside interests
- Give students a task that shows that you trust *them*, such as having them fill your water bottle at the fountain
- Give students space to speak with you if they are upset

Brenda stated that trust issues were key in order to get the studio to "self-regulate". Nicole believed that the trust building and enhanced relationships with students, as well as the approach of community among staff and families is a major draw for families who come to the school.

When asked directly, if the community approach was a draw for families, Nicole said, "Absolutely". She then asked *me* to reflect on what I had observed while at the school… "When you were sitting and watching, how many families are coming in and out of here? They want to be here. We can hardly get the kids to leave. It's just a really close-knit family. Yeah, that's another draw".

Current inability to serve students with significant disabilities. As described before, parents, students, and staff members felt that the special education services offered at the charter school were adequate, and in some cases superior to those in regular public schools. But it cannot be overlooked that the school was not currently educating any students with severe cognitive and/or physical disabilities who require special education services. With few exceptions, the special education students at Montessori Village at the time of my study were expected to receive a high school diploma and live independently as adults.

The parents and students who participated in this study did not have much of an opinion regarding the school's capacity to serve SWDs that were *profoundly* impacted by their disability. However, the school staff members were asked directly about their capacity to serve such students.

"I'm not sure that our school would appeal to a family that would do that right? Because I'm not sure that would appeal to a family", Erica stated when asked how the school might respond to a family who wanted to enroll a student with significant disabilities. Speaking specifically about students with physical disabilities, Erica's comments turned toward the physical space of Montessori Village, and simple matters of access within the building. She mentioned that she wasn't exactly sure about accessibility issues but felt that the school was probably set up appropriately. She seemed uncertain because so few with physical limitations

have been enrolled at the school during her tenure there. Although she was unsure how, Erica stated that if a student with significant disabilities were to enroll, the school staff would find a way to serve the student. "I think that there is no doubt in my mind that we would sit down as a team and be like, 'What do we need to do?' I think that maybe we don't have that on hand at first, but I think that it takes a team to know what you're going to need", she said.

Nicole and Brenda also shared that they have no students with severe cognitive and/or physical disabilities in attendance, but understood that as a public school they could not turn a family away on the basis of disability. When asked about the supports currently in place to meet the needs of *any child* with a disability in the school, Nicole made the following comments.

> We've had a pretty wide range of abilities here, but I've never had kiddos with extreme cognitive disabilities. In fact, I don't have training there. We don't have anyone in the severe training. I'm not sure what would happen if we receive one. We can't turn them away, of course, but we may need to get outside support for that.

It is important to note here, again, that Nicole is the only staff member licensed to teach special education, but her licensure does not include the credentials to serve students with severe or profound cognitive disabilities. So I asked about partnerships that Montessori Village might have to serve such students. Nicole stated that she hasn't been in a position yet where she had to look for such a partnership.

Nicole did share that they take on some students with some pretty severe behavioral issues. She stated that when a student attends their school with aggressive behaviors, they are able to put supports in place to meet the student's needs, even if the student does not have an IEP.

> Even if a kiddo doesn't have an IEP, we start that process early. We do have one down here who doesn't have an IEP, but we do have someone in their studio the entire time because of behavioral and volatility issues.

When Brenda, the school's director, was asked the same question, she stated,

> I'm not sure that we've ever had one that we couldn't (provide services for), but there's been a couple that we felt like we were at a loss, and mostly because the parent wanted something very different than what the philosophy was. We don't have a self-contained room, and every so often ... it's only happened once or twice, where we've put somebody in homebound instruction, because we don't have an alternative setting.

One of my observation activities was that of a parent orientation meeting. It was explained to me that the orientation meeting is a mandatory first step prior to any parent entering the lottery for enrollment. During the observation, I tried to imagine what a parent of a student with severe cognitive disabilities may have felt about the school's educational philosophy and offerings. They may have felt that their child would need more support to become an independent, self-directed learner. I will discuss this finding in more detail in the next chapter. On the other hand, the parent of a student with milder learning problems, such as attention deficit disorder or a learning disability, might have found what the school has to offer rather appealing. The tour leader emphasized the following points about the school's curricular focus during the observation.

- Concept of developmental readiness for learning skills, rather than rigid grade levels.
- Use of manipulatives/multi-modal learning.
- De-emphasis on grades, testing, and much less homework
- Development of trust between learners and instructors.

- Focus on big picture concepts, rather than individual skills
- Goal is growth, not student progress toward grade level learning targets

The staff members that were interviewed stated that if a student with extensive needs were to enroll, they would have to put together an appropriate program for him or her. However, no plan was articulated about how that was to be done. Based on the interview comments of Nicole, Brenda and Erica, they all asserted that Montessori Village was not prepared to serve students with significant cognitive and/or physical disabilities.

Full inclusion model. During our interviews, Nicole and Brenda were asked to describe their special education placements for SWDs. At the time of the interviews, all SWDs spent the majority of their school day in the regular classroom setting. As mentioned before, parents and students alike spoke positively about the inclusive setting at the school. The school staff reported that they were concerned about students feeling different than their peers when they were pulled out of the general classroom. Brenda described the array of services offered at Montessori Village in the following way,

> We have identified kids as full-time ED (emotional disability), and that kind of thing, and put them in that process, and it's mostly up in one of these spaces (nodding toward the office area) or it's a specific serenity room, but we don't have a space where those people go. We would create it based on the need of that child. Most of them are in 80%, in the regular room. I can't think of anyone right now that's not in that situation. The minutes may vary, but they're still met, usually as an integration or collaboration in the studio, or in a common space, that kind of thing.

Nicole expressed some concerns with the fully inclusive model. She is aware of the limited array of special education placements offered at Montessori Village.

> We don't have a pullout system and we don't have a resource room for kiddos. In a lot of ways, I feel that's good, so kiddos are in the mainstream classroom. However, some kids need more intensive services and it's a little bit difficult for us to provide those when they're fully included all the time.

From the classroom teacher's perspective, Erica understood that the school had no special education resource rooms or self-contained learning environments. She described her perspective of placement options for SWDs at Montessori Village.

> Yeah, so we have three main places, a lot of it occurs within the studio, but a lot of it occurs within our common space, which is the room right outside here, because it's super non-intimidating. Now we do, of course, have two spaces that learners can go, but those are for any learners. However if specifically, if I have a learner that's working on emotional stuff, and I know that part of their behavioral intervention plan is to step out, when they've reached this point, or point A, then there are rooms that they can go to work in a peaceful place, and those are … I know that there's somebody in there right now from 01:00 until 03:00, and they're just there to help whoever, and that learner may not even have a behavioral intervention plan, but there may be something I'm noticing, 'Hey look, you're struggling this week, let's go.'

My observations of the school confirmed the reports of those interviewed. There are different places for students to go for help on academics or a calming place to manage their emotions, but there were no resource rooms or self-contained, separate spaces that were specifically dedicated to the delivery of special education services. However, when a special education student needed individualized instruction, it was provided by staff, but not necessarily those licensed in special education.

The classroom observation described in Chapter 3, provided some insight on how specialized instruction for SWDs was provided at Montessori Village. Erica, a licensed general education teacher, provided the instruction for all of her students, including those with disabilities. However, the special education student in the outer area of the studio raised some questions regarding the inclusive philosophy of the school. I later asked Nicole, the special education coordinator, why he was separated from his classmates. She informed me that *he* preferred the space he was given in the outer commons area and was not *placed* there. She added that the school staff was continually working toward having him spend more time with the rest of the students in the studio. It would appear that SWDs at Montessori Village have the ability to choose their learning environment based on what they can tolerate, just as their non-disabled peers. This may impact IEP team decisions regarding the student's least restrictive environment, i.e. where they receive their specialized instruction.

III. Conclusion

My field experiences at Montessori Village were useful in addressing the research questions. My observation experiences aligned with what I was being told in interviews. The staff at Montessori Village was cordial, and made me feel welcome upon each visit. I was told on more than one occasion that they wanted to see my study's findings so they could reflect on their work and hopefully improve their services for SWDs.

In the next chapter, I made meaning of the results of my data collection procedures, specifically how the data that I collected answered the research questions. I also made some comparisons between my research and prior research that was discussed in my literature review. I reveal where my research fills gaps in the earlier research, as well as share how my work could

be utilized to inform policies and practices with regard to the appropriate services for SWDs within charter and regular public school settings.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first section, I discuss how the information I gathered at Montessori Village answered my research questions. In Section II, I revisit the themes that emerged during my literature review in order to compare and contrast those findings with my own at Montessori Village. I then share why my study is unique when compared to other studies that are relevant to the topic. In Section III, I provide conclusions, beginning with my study's limitations followed by implications for state charter school policy. Then, I identify implications of my study for legislators, charter *and* regular public schools and parents of SWDs. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further research.

Section I: Addressing the Research Questions

The data collection procedures yielded valuable information to answer the research questions that were presented in Chapter Three. In the subsections that follow, each research question is revisited with supporting data that addresses the specific research question.

Question one: What are the perceptions of charter school administrators, staff, parents, and students regarding their school's abilities to serve SWDs in compliance with the main principles of IDEA? Generally speaking, the parents and students interviewed during my study reported being very satisfied with the special education procedures and services. Each parent and student interviewed reported being significantly more satisfied with the service provisions at Montessori Village when compared to regular public schools. School staff provided more information than the parents and students with regard to the school's status of compliance with the main principles of IDEA. In order to clearly answer the first research question, it was useful for me to analyze the data using the most significant provisions of IDEA as a guide. These

provisions, according to Yell (2016), include *zero reject, identification and evaluation, free appropriate public education (FAPE), least restrictive environment (LRE), procedural safeguards, and parental participation.*

Zero reject. Zero reject refers to the foundational precept of IDEA where an education cannot be denied to qualified students on the basis of disability, no matter how severe (Yell, 2016). The levels of enrollment of SWDs at Montessori Village were indicative of a school that was welcoming to those who need special education services and understood that they could not discriminate. Interview questions presented to school staff delved deeper into the concept of zero reject. Staff responses indicated a clear understanding of the school's responsibility to serve SWDs who were enrolled, or may be enrolled. Erica, the general education teacher, discussed how the staff would come together to develop a plan if a student with significant disabilities were to enroll. She felt that there was "no doubt" that they would be able to meet the needs of any child who enrolled. Nicole, the school's special education coordinator, was asked about the school's responsibilities to a student with significant disabilities. When asked directly by me, "What happens when a student that needs extensive levels of support wants to enroll here"? Nicole simply and matter-of-factly stated, "We have to do it. We do it."

Identification and evaluation. IDEA requires that before a student is placed in special education, he or she must be evaluated to see if an IDEA disability exists, and whether or not special education services are needed to address the disability (Yell, 2016). My observations and interviews at Montessori Village provided evidence that the school staff understood the process of a multi-disciplinary approach to evaluation for special education services and/or related services. On their website, in the Family Handbook, there was a section dedicated to *exceptional learners* where the process for special education evaluation is described. A significant portion of

the section discussed the intervention process *prior to* a formal evaluation for special education eligibility and services. Also, each staff member in interviews was able to articulate the data collection process for interventions prior to the formal referral for special education testing. Nicole, the special education coordinator, explained their pre-referral intervention process, where "due to lack of progress" in the Montessori sequence, targeted interventions are put into place for the student. The developmental specialists collaborate with the general education teacher to implement interventions. She stated that the process is called STI, or *Strategic Teacher Interventions.*

The handbook also included a listing of personnel who would be available to provide assessments and special education services at the school. Special education teachers and contracted personnel, such as school psychologists, speech/language pathologists, and occupational and physical therapists all were listed as staff provided to conduct assessments and provide special education and related services. Also within the handbook's exceptional learners section there is a statement that Montessori Village follows all state and federal guidelines with regard to the education of students with disabilities.

Along with the information provided in the Family Handbook and through interviews, I observed an IEP Team meeting where a discussion with regard to a student's suspected need for school-based occupational therapy services was discussed. The discussion resulted in a team decision to evaluate for eligibility for occupational therapy and signed parent consent was obtained on the spot. The timeline for completion of the evaluation was shared by school staff as well as the need to have a meeting to discuss the results of the evaluation.

FAPE. FAPE is described as special education and related services that are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge, meet state standards,

include preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the state and are provided in conformity with the individualized education program [34 C.F.R. § 300.17]. The IDEA principle of FAPE requires that schools develop individualized plans for SWDs that ensure they may benefit from the curriculum and educational services provided in their school. Evidence of FAPE is included in a student's IEP, which is proposed and developed during an IEP team meeting. At the team meeting I observed, all IDEA-required participants were present. According to Yell (2016), IEP team members include student's parents or guardians, a special education teacher, a general education teacher, a public agency representative who can commit special education resources, and an instructional strategist who can interpret evaluation results and make educational recommendations based on those results (p. 216).

During the meeting, the team discussed *all* of the IDEA-required components of the student's IEP. These required components, according to Yell (2016) include:

- A statement of the student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance
- A statement of the student's measureable annual goals
- How the student's IEP goals will be measured
- A statement of the special education and related services that the student will receive
- An explanation of the extent, if any, that the student will be educated away from his/her non-disabled peers
- A statement of accommodations afforded the student on state and district wide assessments

- The projected date for beginning the special education services with the anticipated frequency, location, and duration of those services
- A statement of appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based on age-appropriate transition assessment services and the services needed for the student to meet those goals (p. 221)

This last component, transition services from high school to postsecondary education and/or training are an IDEA requirement in each student's IEP when he or she turns 16 (Yell, p. 221). During interviews, students, parents and school staff mentioned the value of internships in which the juniors and seniors participate as they transition from high school to postsecondary living. These experiences seemed to align with the IEP requirements of students in high school (Yell, 2016). However, I am unsure that this requirement is being met for all SWDs at the school. The two students that I interviewed found their transition experiences beneficial. Montessori Village appears to be attempting to meet this IDEA requirement via internships with local businesses or agencies. One student reported the benefits of his internship experiences and how he has added them to college enrollment applications. His experiences included a six-month internship with the Red Cross, working in a hospital under the tutelage of an emergency room doctor and volunteering on a campaign team for a local public official.

Interview responses from the general education teacher further illustrated that IEPs are used to improve academic outcomes for SWDs at Montessori Village. Erica reported that she had a valuable role in IEP development. Her role in meetings included reporting what is and isn't working for the student in the classroom as well as to highlight student strengths so the team could "create a better plan." During my observation of the IEP team meeting, the general

education teacher was prepared with student academic and behavioral data to help the team make informed decisions.

Least restrictive environment. IDEA mandates that SWDs are educated with their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate [34 C.F.R. § 300.550(b)(1)]. Special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily [34 C.F.R. § 300.114(a)(2)(i)]. Public school districts must offer a continuum of services to meet the needs of SWDs. This continuum, listed from least to most restrictive, could include regular classes, resource rooms, special classes, special schools, homebound instruction, and instruction in hospitals and institutions (Yell, 2016, p. 59). Formal observations within the school and interview data from school personnel, students, and parents reveal that Montessori Village almost exclusively relies on the regular classroom setting to serve their population of SWDs. At Montessori Village, special education support staff provided services to students in the regular education classroom with the general education teacher providing the core instruction. During our interview, I asked Erica if there was a resource room for SWDs.

> Well, I wouldn't necessarily call it a resource room, we certainly have a space where there are staff members that specifically know the IEPs and work in conjunction with the teacher of record to make sure that their needs are met.

She then added that "very rarely, other than speech" do students go to a space that's a little bit more quiet. Brenda, the school's director and co-founder, answered questions about placement continuums in a similar way. She described how she and her staff would *create* a setting to serve a SWD that needed a more restrictive placement. Nicole mentioned in her

interview that when a student needs a more restrictive setting, for intensive academic or behavioral support, a space is created for him or her in the office area. Adam stated in his interview that he was occasionally moved to the office area to work one-on-one with Nicole to complete assignments when he fell behind. During our interview, Brenda was not aware of any students that were currently enrolled at Montessori Village that required a placement outside of the regular classroom.

One of the themes discussed in Chapter Four, was the charter school's limited capacity to offer SWDs a continuum of placement options. This has the potential to be problematic for the school if a student with needs that must be addressed outside the regular classroom setting were to enroll. As previously mentioned, interview data indicate that the *current* special education population is perceived by staff, parents and students as being adequately served. The school staff feels that pulling students out of the regular setting makes them feel *different* from their peers. Parents reported coming to the school *because of* the inclusiveness of their special education programs and the students interviewed expressed a desire to receive their educational services in the regular classroom setting. When asked directly about if he was getting the help he needed at Montessori Village, one student reported, "Always. I haven't had one time that I have been nervous about not having the help."

The IDEA construct of least restrictive environment is somewhat challenged by the individualized model employed by Montessori Village. Although they do not have resource rooms or a self-contained setting for SWDs, they do appear to be able to offer the level of support needed for students to be successful. In many traditional school models, a continuum of placements, spanning from full inclusion to a self-contained classroom for SWDs, is sometimes available, but not always needed. Also, smaller, regular public schools do not always have

available a self-contained setting for students with significant cognitive and/or physical disabilities. Rather, the school district may offer a program for students with low-incidence disabilities and students who need such services are transported from their homeschool to the school where the program is housed. According to school staff, they are willing and able to put together a special education program to meet the needs of any student. However, according to Nicole, the school's special education coordinator, they have not yet had to develop a program for a student with significant cognitive and/or physical disabilities.

Procedural safeguards. A foundational piece of IDEA is the procedural safeguards put in place to protect the interests of students with disabilities. IDEA uses an extensive system of procedural safeguards to ensure that parents are equal participants in the special education process (Yell, 2016, p.59). The state provides schools with a document to share with parents that includes, among other things, their rights as parents of a student with a disability. By state law, this document must be given to parents at least once each year. According to Nicole, parents are provided a copy of the document each year when the student's annual review is scheduled. During my observation of the IEP Team meeting, the parents were asked if they received a copy of their procedural safeguards notice and they indicated that they had.

A more detailed explanation of the principle of procedural safeguards is provided in Chapter One. Many of these safeguards come into play when there is conflict or disagreement between the parents and the school with regard to the provision of FAPE for the student. The procedural safeguards provided to parents include information about what steps they might take if they find themselves in disagreement with the school's special education programming for their child. At the time of my research, the school staff reported no current disagreements with parents of SWDs that would bring the IDEA procedural safeguards into play. However, the

school's director did mention that there had been some parent challenges in the past. These are explained in greater detail in the subsection below titled *legal issues*.

Parent participation. According to IDEA, parents must be involved in evaluation, IEP meetings, and placement decisions (Yell, 2016). During the IEP Team meeting, I observed a student's parents being involved in decisions regarding their child's special education placement, services, accommodations, and additional evaluations. The staff at Montessori Village appeared to place a high value on parent partnerships to support the learning of all children. During interviews, parents reported feeling as if their voices were heard when it came to offering suggestions or discussing concerns with their child's special education program. One parent, Melanie, described her role in her child's IEP development and said, "I feel like they come to me with what they feel that (my child) needs, and I can either agree or disagree, or add additional information." When asked directly if she felt as if she was a decision maker at IEP Team meetings, she stated, "I do."

In summarizing my study results with regard to research question one, interview data and formal observations indicate that Montessori Village's special education programs are perceived by study participants as legally compliant with IDEA principles addressed above. However, school staff members did have some reservations about their special education services and recognized their limitations. All three staff members reported that they are not equipped or staffed well enough to meet the needs of students with significant cognitive and/or physical disabilities. In fact, no one on the staff held the correct teaching license to legally serve as a teacher of students with severe/profound disabilities. However, each staff member reported that if a student with significant learning needs were to enroll, they would collaboratively do what

was necessary to develop a program for that student. No clear plan was shared on what the school's course of action would be if such a student enrolled.

Question two: In what ways do the school's mission, curricular design, and physical structure enhance or inhibit efforts to meet the needs of SWDs? The special education population at Montessori Village was nearly 20%, which is significant considering the state average was just 14.9%. I prompted the staff at Montessori Village to reveal their perceptions of their capacity to meet the needs of SWDs as well as their limitations. In doing so, I found that the school staff felt very confident that their services to SWDs were sound and in compliance with IDEA. They reported that the school's emphasis on individualized instruction, parent participation, and inclusive philosophy enhanced their efforts to appropriately serve SWDs. My analysis of question two will be addressed by considering the school's mission, its curricular design, and its physical structure.

The school's mission. The Family Handbook, available on their website, clearly articulates the school's mission and vision for educating young people. However, I also incorporated questions about the school's mission and vision during my interviews. When asked directly how the school's mission enhanced or inhibited their services for SWDs, school staff members felt that Montessori Village's individualized programming enhanced their special education services. When I asked Nicole about the school's emphasis on meeting the needs of individual learners, she said, "That's our motto. That's our goal. I think we try really hard to do that**".** Brenda, the school's director, reinforced Nicole's comments about how individualized instruction is a cornerstone of the school's philosophy.

> I think it sometimes almost feels like, we're already accommodating so many kids, because everything's individualized. Our accommodation process is only about testing,

> formal testing like (state testing), because we accommodate for everybody throughout the building. I think that's part of that. It's a culture of differentiated instruction. It's a culture of knowing the *why* behind the *do***.**

Melanie, a parent of two students at Montessori Village, said that each day teachers meet with her students and go over their learning plan to see what work has been accomplished and what still needs to be done. Perhaps most importantly, the students were aware of the individualized approach to learning offered at Montessori Village. When Alan was asked about what he liked about the school, he stated, "I like that it is independent based." He went on to say that he is permitted to complete work within a time frame that is comfortable for him. He did state that this level of freedom sometimes presents problems for him, because he tends to fall behind his deadlines. At that point, he told me, he is given more individualized support from a staff member to get his projects/assignments completed.

Curricular design. Participant comments and my observations indicated that the Montessori curriculum was perceived as supportive of the learning of SWDs. When specifically asked about how the school's curricular design enhanced or inhibited the services to SWDs, Nicole referred back to the individualization of the Montessori sequence.

> Montessori stems from a lot of the manipulative materials. It's not something that can be presented to kiddos in bulk like where we have large group lessons. It's really difficult to do that with Montessori materials. It's very individualized and it's also, again, child-led. If the kiddo's interested in a material or receiving a lesson on the material, then we give it to him.

Nicole's reference to the lack of "large group lessons" was echoed by the parents who were interviewed. Melanie and Kathy both stated that the regular public school model of whole group

instruction was not a good fit for their children. Melanie felt that her daughter would not be served well if she were "constrained to sitting at a desk" for long periods of time. She went on to say that the movement in the classroom was one of the first things she noticed at Montessori Village. However, Melanie did say that, at times, her children need a little more structure and discipline than what is expected within the Montessori model.

> Sometimes my children need a little bit more structure, a little bit more push that I feel that they might not necessarily get all the time from here. I do feel I go to the developmental specialists they're working with and I express that concern, and they have, over time, gotten to know my child and were like, 'Okay, this child needs to be... Okay, we need to do this now, not the choice where you can do this or you can do this, or I can help you do this. It's like, 'We need to sit here and we have to get this done' kind of thing, which isn't necessarily Montessori philosophy.

Melanie's comments indicate that she perceives a Montessori model as not always appropriate for her daughter, who lacks some self-motivation. However, she seems to feel that the school staff will accommodate her child when she needs a more coercive approach from staff to complete her school work.

From a teacher's standpoint, Erica feels as if the school's curricular design may in the long run be better for all students because of the lack of focus on performing well on standardized tests. "I think that our curricular design encourages kids to *think*. And I'm not always sure that tests are designed for kids to think**".**

Physical structure. My observations while at Montessori Village indicated that the school was organized and arranged to facilitate student exploration, movement, and interaction with others. This design was, generally speaking, considered helpful to SWDs, with some

exceptions. Rather than individual desks, classrooms were arranged with tables for seating students who could easily interact with one another. Classrooms, or studios as they were called, were decorated with student work. Manipulatives and learning materials were visible and accessible to the students. Each studio opened into a larger common area that was shared by several studios. The physical setup of the building was praised by Erica, who shared that open classrooms and proximity to other teachers supports the school's "collaborative spirit". She also liked that she had access to a kitchen area so that she could assist students with cooking, cleaning and other life skills. During one of my observations Erica used the kitchen area to teach life skills to a student with an IEP. She reflected further on the physical attributes of the school and was relatively sure that it was free from barriers for those with physical disabilities, "the way the doors open, and things like that".

The openness of the studios and common areas in the school were not conducive to teacher led, whole-group instruction. In fact, during my formal and informal observations, I rarely heard a teacher speaking. The majority of the instruction I observed was one-to-one or small group, where the teacher was providing feedback on student work or discussing student learning plans. Mostly, the students communicated freely with one another and for the most part appeared to be on task and engaged in their learning. There was lots of movement by some students, while others worked independently at a table. Some students listened to music with headphones as they worked and many were using laptops or Chromebooks to support their learning.

As I moved around the classrooms, it was evident that not every student was working on the same material and/or assignment. The lessons in which each student engaged appeared to be highly individualized. It is also important to note that within each studio that I observed there

were places for students who needed an area free from distractions. Students were also observed working in the common area outside the classroom at a table by themselves.

The physical organization of the school, coupled with the expectations of the Montessori curriculum presented some difficulties for one student. Melanie, the child's parent, shared that her daughter has social, emotional anxiety. When she entered the fourth grade she "became very introverted and into herself, and wouldn't move around the room". Melanie stated that the school made her aware of her daughter's reluctance to engage while at school and that a plan to assist her was developed within the IEP. After the plan was developed, which included having peers and staff persuade her to move to go get the work she needed, Melanie stated that her daughter was "doing a whole lot better" with her anxiety.

Question three: What training, resources, and expertise do the study participants perceive as needed to effectively serve students with special needs in the charter school setting? With regard to training and knowledge, parents and students were at a loss to say what is needed for the staff to serve SWDs more effectively. One parent did state that the school sponsors parent training in certain areas, such as arranging presentations with the Vocational Rehabilitation Agency for students who may need assistance as adults. She also mentioned annual Montessori workshops that have various sessions regarding special education and serving SWDs effectively. School staff reported that they have annual training regarding special education rules and laws in which all staff must participate. Nicole, the special education coordinator who is licensed in the area of special education, facilitates the staff training each year. Nicole shared during her interview that she wanted the school staff to be more informed about special education compliance issues. She reported some tension between the relaxed atmosphere of the school and the attention to detail that must be in place to legally serve SWDs.

She reported that she felt she is making progress with the staff with regard to following very complex special education rules and laws.

Some staff members, after initially discussing what training they had received, offered little else with regard to professional development needs related to serving SWDs. It is important to note that they were concerned about how they might serve students with significant cognitive and/or physical needs. As mentioned previously, all staff members felt that they could meet the needs of a significantly disabled student at their school, but they did not have a specific plan, or current staffing to do so. Most likely, and this was articulated by Nicole, the school would need outside support and resources should a student with significant cognitive disabilities enroll. Montessori Village did not, at the time of my study, have the resources, facilities or expertise to implement the type of program needed for a student with significant cognitive and/or physical disabilities. Nicole stated that no one at the school had the appropriate license to serve as a teacher for a student with severe cognitive and/or physical disabilities. Also, special education transportation that may be necessary for a student with significant physical needs was not available. In my observations throughout the school, I saw no classrooms that were designed to meet the physical needs of a student with significant disabilities, such as furniture that might accommodate a wheelchair or changing tables that may assist staff with a child with toileting needs. When I asked about separate learning environments for SWDs that may need extensive care, I was told that there were none.

The interviews, observations, and review of the school's data and website provided me with the data I needed to answer my initial research questions. My observations while at the school supported what interview participants shared with me during our discussions and the school's website information also supported the data collected. Further, the information gleaned

from the research methods allowed for comparisons to past research. In some cases, my research supports the findings of past studies from my literature review in chapter two, and in other cases there are some significant differences.

Section II: Comparison to Past Research

Comparing my own research at Montessori Village with the research from the literature review in Chapter Two showed what gaps my study filled. Also, comparing past research with my own illuminates what areas of further study may be necessary with regard to SWDs being appropriately served in the charter school setting. In the following sections, I revisit the themes and one of the assumptions that emerged during my literature review. In each section I include findings from my study that concur with, or contradict findings from previous studies.

Charter schools educate SWDs in a manner that is specific to their school's mission and resources. Montessori Village was designed to meet the needs of students and families who were interested in a *Montessori* education. The school was certainly organized in the spirit of the Montessori model. They utilized developmental groupings of students, rather than strict grade level grouping, a hands on approach to learning, and an exploratory, self-guided platform so that each student could become responsible for their own learning within their own time frame (Cossentino, 2010). According to interview data, the students' freedom to move about the classroom rather than being confined to a desk was appealing for families and students.

On their website, Montessori Village presented itself as a school that embraced individualized learning, communication between the school and family, cooperative learning, freedom of movement, exploration, and pace of learning. As described in the previous section, the Montessori model in many ways seems to align with the individualized practices of special education. This may have some impact on a parent's decision to enroll in a Montessori school.

Disproportionate enrollment. My review of the relevant literature indicated that charter schools enroll a lower percentage of SWDs than regular public schools (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012; Wolf, 2010). This is *not* what I found in my case study of Montessori Village. When compared to the state average and some surrounding schools and school districts, Montessori Village served a *higher* percentage of SWDs. However, the students enrolled at the school all had milder and higher incidence disabilities, such as learning disabilities, other health impairments, mild cognitive disabilities and autism. *No* students were enrolled who had significant disabilities that would require intensive physical and educational support to make progress or would need a curriculum focused on basic life skills. This finding was aligned with past research regarding charter schools' tendency to enroll students with milder disabilities (Drame, 2011; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012; Garcy, 2011; McKinney & Mead, 1996; Rhim, Faukner, & McLaughlin, 2006; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2001).

The high enrollment of SWDs at Montessori Village presents some questions. Why would so many families who had children who need special education services choose Montessori Village? Perhaps the answer to this question has to do with the Montessori model and the inclusive philosophy held by the staff at Montessori Village. Or, perhaps the *community of learners* approach discussed in the last chapter employed at the school appealed to the students and families at Montessori Village. Finn, Caldwell, and Raub (2006) reported that the special education services at the charter school in their study were perceived as satisfactory by the parents because of the special education teachers and their willingness to communicate with the parents. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, parents and students alike felt a connection with the school staff at Montessori Village. They all reported that relationships with school staff were one of the biggest reasons for their satisfaction with the school.

Perhaps the reason for the disproportionately higher enrollment numbers of SWDs at Montessori Village had to do with the school's acceptance and expectation of learning differences among students. The school staff, as evidenced on their website, expected that students would learn at their own pace and perform best when they pursued their individual interests. Such a philosophy has a clear alignment with the individualized approach to instruction required by IDEA (Cossentino, 2010). Also, the staff at Montessori Village embraced inclusive practice. The SWDs there were served nearly 100% in the general education setting. However, the inclusive model at Montessori Village may be a double edged sword. Having only one placement option could be problematic if a student needed more special education support than can be offered in the regular classroom by teachers, most of which were not licensed to teach special education. An alternative explanation for Montessori Village's high enrollment of SWDs may include the parent's agreement with the staff's perspective on the utility of state-mandated testing as a true measure of learning. They too may feel that performance testing of their child is detrimental to their educational experience.

Problems with special education in the charter school setting. Fiore, et al. (2000) found that most charter schools either utilized the inclusive model as a pedagogical preference, or utilized the model because of budget constraints. My findings supported the Fiore, et al. study. Montessori Village used the regular classroom setting as the least restrictive environment (LRE) almost exclusively. The school staff did embrace inclusion and felt that it was better for the students. They reported in interviews that pulling students out of the regular classroom for services was damaging to the student's self-esteem. Budgetary constraints were not mentioned as a reason for serving SWDs primarily in the regular classroom setting. However, the inclusive model did allow them to have only one licensed special education teacher on staff and would

have financial implications for the school. The use of inclusion by charter schools is not necessarily problematic, but legal issues could arise if the school was unable to meet the special education needs of a student because they lack a continuum of placement options.

Although the LRE discussion still seems to be pertinent when compared to past research, my study revealed that the staff at Montessori Village is knowledgeable about the legal implementation of special education services. Montessori Village staff seemed well versed in special education requirements that are imbedded in IDEA. The school staff understood pre-referral interventions to address the needs of students who are struggling academically or behaviorally. Students at Montessori Village were also provided with related services, such as occupational and physical therapy and counseling services to support their learning needs. However, transportation as a related service for SWDs was not provided by the school, or for any students for that matter. This raises equity considerations based on the socio-economic status (SES) of families that have chosen (or not chosen) to attend Montessori Village. It is possible that parents who financially depend on school transportation may not consider a school that does not offer such a service. Not offering transportation could effectively eliminate a number of students of lower SES or SWDs. This is potentially an area for further study.

School administration at Montessori Village understood the rights of SWDs when it comes to disciplinary procedures related to suspension and/or expulsion. This was an area of expertise that some respondents, mainly school administrators, in previous studies *did not* exhibit. My findings at Montessori Village stood in stark contrast to earlier studies that found charter school administrators lacking in knowledge and expertise in matters of special education processes (Drame, 2011; Drame & Frattura, 2011; Estes, 2008; Fiore et al., 2000).

In short, my case study of Montessori Village indicates that the school staff does appear to understand the main requirements of special education programming, including the pre-referral, referral, and IEP team meeting process. As I observed some of these processes, it appeared that the school staff was aware of special education requirements and how to adequately, *and from initial analysis, legally,* meet the needs of SWDs in their building.

Legal issues. The staff at Montessori Village reported no current legal problems with families of SWDs. When I asked further, the school's director reported only a couple of instances when a parent of a SWDs challenged them on their special education programming. From her perspective, the problems were mainly due to the family and the student not "buying into "Montessori Village's philosophy.

In her interview, Brenda described one situation in the following way:

> I'm not sure that we've ever had one that we couldn't [provide services for], but there's been a couple that we felt like we were at a loss, and mostly because the parent wanted something very different than what the philosophy was. They really took them out of the other setting [regular public school], because they didn't want the self-contained classroom, or they didn't feel like they were treated nice, or whatever. They didn't really want this philosophy either. They wanted more structure, or rigidity, and so I think that part makes it difficult.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the Montessori Village philosophy and curricular offerings are specifically communicated to parents at orientation meetings and on their website. The way that the school advertised itself was designed to help families make informed decisions about whether or not the school aligned with the family's educational expectations and needs.

This most likely had an impact on families of SWDs when they explored what Montessori Village had to offer their child.

Wolf (2010) described a practice called *counseling out*, where she found that charter school personnel were encouraging families of SWDs to enroll elsewhere because they were unable to meet their child's special needs. I found *no* evidence that the staff at Montessori Village engaged in such a practice. On the contrary, I found the staff's comments during interviews to be very welcoming to SWDs or any students with learning differences. In interviews, the parents reported feeling welcome during the enrollment process and the subsequent meetings to discuss their child's special education needs. The school's high level of enrollment of students who receive special education services would seem to reflect the staff's willingness to accept SWDs through their doors. Even for students with significant disabilities, although none were enrolled at the time of my study, staff members understood that they could not turn students away based on their level of educational need. Each staff member understood that they must provide any SWD, regardless of their level of need, an appropriate special education program.

It may be that the marketing of Montessori Village, on their website and in their parent orientation meetings, had an impact on some families with students with significant cognitive and/or physical disabilities. As described in chapter two, a Montessori education is grounded in self-directed learning through discovery, allowing students to manipulate items that interest them, and allowing students freedom to move in the classroom setting and interacting with peers to support and enhance their learning. It is possible that such a learning environment might not "appeal to", as Erica put it during her interview, a family who has a child with significant cognitive and/or physical disabilities. Indeed, a parent with a student with significant disabilities

may feel that their child would not "fit in" at a school where so much movement, interaction among students, and self-directed learning is taking place. This may be particularly true if their child has a disability that impacts their movement, communication, or independent functioning.

The way that charter schools market themselves and the educational experiences that are offered perhaps have a *soft* counseling out effect on parents, even if unintended by school staff. This is a matter for further study. It would appear that the programs at Montessori Village appeal to families of students whose disabilities are mild, but not so much for those with more significant cognitive and/or physical disabilities.

Partnerships. My findings at Montessori Village are in some ways comparable to what was revealed as I examined the relevant literature with regard to partnerships. Partnerships with outside entities seemed to be of assistance to charter schools to effectively implement special education programs. In particular, Rhim and McLaughlin (2001) categorized the charter schools they studied by level of partnerships they had with outside entities, such as local, regular public schools. The charter schools were categorized as *total link*, *partial link,* and *no link,* describing the levels of support each had from regular public schools that presumably had greater resources and expertise in serving SWDs. Montessori Village would be considered a *no link* charter school by Rhim and McLaughlin's study standards. In other words, Montessori Village operated independently from any local, regular school districts. In the study, Rhim and McLaughlin found that the more independently the charter school operated the more difficulties the staff had in understanding their responsibilities with regard to serving SWDs. Further, their resources were more limited when compared to partial and total link charter schools. I *did not* find in my study that Montessori Village lacked expertise or resources to meet the needs of the SWDs *they were currently serving*. Although they had no partnerships with local school districts, they did

effectively contract with school psychologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech/language pathologists to comply with their current IEP demands. However, when asked about the ever-present issue of what would happen if a student with significant disabilities were to enroll, Nicole stated that they may need to look for outside assistance. No plan was articulated to me about how that was to be done.

Drame (2011) also studied the issues faced by what she described as *independent* charter schools, meaning that they share no partnership or resources with a regular public school district. Drame's study did illuminate some issues that are still relevant for Montessori Village. According to Drame, implementing IEPs from other districts when students moved into a charter school was reported as challenging for 90% of independent charters compared to 57% of school district charters. I found that Montessori Village's service delivery model is nearly 100% in the general education setting. When students enroll in Montessori Village from another school district, it is likely that the LRE of *at least some* of those move-in students is something *other* than the fully inclusive classroom setting, which was Montessori Village's primary option.

Again, during my study I found no evidence that the staff at Montessori Village would intentionally exclude any SWDs from enrollment or effective service. But no plan was in place regarding the school's course of action if a student with significant needs were to enroll at Montessori Village. I will reiterate again that all staff members interviewed shared that meeting the needs of such a student could be done, but it would be difficult and take some collaborative planning. Having a plan in place as well as a means to secure the necessary resources to serve students with significant educational and physical needs would be a proactive measure to ensure that they were prepared to serve any student who might enroll.

Montessori Village Case Study: A Unique and Meaningful Perspective

My case study of Montessori Village is unique in several ways. First, my findings are somewhat contrary to previous research on the topic that was detailed in my literature review. The school did appear to be appropriately serving SWDs and the staff there seemed to understand their responsibilities with regard to IDEA. The parents and students who were interviewed all had previous experiences within the regular school setting. All reported being more satisfied with the special education services at Montessori Village than with their former regular public school. Second, the specific curricular focus of a charter school does seem to matter with regard to their ability to serve SWDs in compliance with the main principles of IDEA. The parent and student satisfaction described above was reportedly rooted in the inclusive philosophy and the hands on, differentiated and self-paced approach to learning that is paramount in the Montessori philosophy (Cossentino, 2010). One intent of my study was to fill a gap in the current research with regard to how the unique curricular offerings of charter schools impact their ability to serve SWDs. In the case of Montessori Village, it would appear that their curricular focus enhances their efforts to provide services to SWDs whose disabilities are of a milder nature.

My use of a case study model was also unique in comparison to other studies on the topic. The staff, parents and students at Montessori Village offered a unique perspective on how an independent charter school, with a specific curricular model, implemented special education programs for SWDs. My study adds to the current body of knowledge on the topic by drilling down into the specific perspectives of individuals who are part of a single school community. I prompted the staff at Montessori Village to reveal their perceptions of their capacity to meet the needs of SWDs as well as their limitations. The case study model also provided me with some information that transcended my research questions about SWDs, such as its implications for

both charter and regular public schools. I found that parents and students value strong, meaningful relationships with their school community and appreciate a focus on student strengths and interests. Montessori Village offered families *full access* to the school community. During interviews and observations, all parents were consistently treated as partners in their child's education. The level of communication that the parents described with regard to special education programming transcended the parental participation requirements of IDEA. Also at the school, SWDs were recognized as in need of specialized instruction, but the disability was not the focus of the child's education. Rather, the students' interests and abilities drove educational decisions made on their behalf by school staff, *not* their disability. With no exceptions, every interview participant applauded the school's de-emphasis on disability in favor of student strengths.

Section III: Conclusion

In this closing section I share my thoughts on my study's implications. There are implications for legislators and charter school policy, implications for practice for charter *and* regular public schools, implications for parents and implications for further study. Prior to engaging in a discussion about implications, it is first necessary to revisit the limitations of my study that were presented in chapter three.

Limitations of study. Because the subsections that follow include some implications and recommendations regarding charter school policy and practice, it is important to recognize that my case study approach is, by design, very specific to the perceptions of those at Montessori Village. Therefore, my findings are not generalizable to other settings. This is one of the reasons that I chose to revisit the themes from my literature review, allowing me to make comparisons of my study to past studies on the topic and look for agreement or dissonance. Through this process

I found Montessori Village to be an *outlier* with regard to levels of SWD enrollment. They enroll a higher percentage of SWDs than the state average as well as the averages of nearby regular public schools. Further, Montessori Village employed practices that align closely with the IDEA mandate of individualized instruction. At Montessori Village all students, regardless of disability status, were accommodated based upon their unique learning needs. The focus of the school was not limited to improving state mandated test scores, but allowing students to follow their interests as they learned in an effort to achieve independence and take responsibility for their own learning. As they did so, students were engaged in a Montessori sequence of materials and activities that were aligned to each child's developmental readiness and needs. Such an environment, particularly the de-emphasis on high-stakes testing performance, contradicts a major premise that prompted my interest in this topic: *charter schools are primarily interested in high student achievement scores in order to maintain their charter authorization. This may result in SWDs being excluded from enrollment.* During interviews, the staff at Montessori Village consistently questioned the utility of high stakes test scores as a true measure of learning and therefore were not willing to stray from educating children and youths in a manner that was consistent with their school's mission.

My choice to examine the school's legal compliance for SWDs using only six main principles of IDEA is another potential limitation. This decision eliminates potential state level violations, or other issues that may arise from recent case law. Also, the school staff seemed to have a better grasp of IDEA concepts when compared to students and parents. Comparing the perceptions of IDEA compliance among differing interview groups has limited utility.

Despite the limitations of my study, it does illuminate some areas where charter school policy and practice may be improved with regard to appropriately serving SWDs. Below are

some implications for state charter school policy as well as some practical implications for both charter and regular public schools.

Implications for legislators and charter school policy. My study of Montessori Village Charter School has implications for potential improvements in charter school policy. First, although the state in which Montessori Village is located requires charter schools to include in their charter agreement a plan for serving SWDs, these plans may not offer enough specificity. It would be of benefit to charter schools, and ultimately SWDs and their families, to know what levels of support may be offered to SWDs in each charter school. My study and the studies that I have reviewed indicated that SWDs in charter schools are mostly served in the regular education setting with an inclusion model. Although it is an IDEA requirement to serve SWDs in the general education setting to the fullest extent possible (Yell, 2016), the regular education setting is not always appropriate for *all* SWDs.

In defense of charter schools, it is unrealistic to expect each to have a full continuum of special education placements (such as resource rooms, self-contained classrooms, etc.) that are appropriately staffed and prepared to serve any student, regardless of his or her level of need. Even regular public schools don't always have all levels of placement categories on site, particularly small, rural schools with low enrollment. But what regular school *districts* must offer is a continuum of placements that include the general education classroom, special classroom, special school, homebound services, or an institution (Yell, 2016). My suggestion for state policy improvement is a requirement that in charter agreements with state level sponsors, schools detail their plan for serving SWDs in *each LRE placement category*. Again, this doesn't mean that they must have immediate access to each placement on site, but they should have a written plan for what they would do to ensure that they could offer each placement. Such plans may include a list

of agencies or school districts that the charter school may partner with or hire to provide services for a student who had a level of need not readily offered at the school. Further, each charter school should be required to earmark a percentage of their funding to prepare for the needs of a student that may surpass the school's current resources. This may be of legal assistance to charter school operators who are concerned about their lack of capacity to meet the needs of all SWDs who may enroll in their school. In one legal case mentioned in Chapter Two, *Central Dauphin School District v. Founding Coalition of the Infinity Charter School,* a charter school for gifted students successfully won an appeal to open their school in part because they had made a budgetary commitment to serve SWDs (Decker, et al., 2010). More importantly, if charter schools could specifically and transparently share *how* they propose to provide services to all SWDs, regardless of level of need, parents would be better informed when considering enrollment in a charter school.

Here I would like to introduce the notion that perhaps my study had a potential impact on the services offered to SWDs at Montessori Village. After I began my study and asked direct questions during interviews about the continuum of placements at the school, several staff members made some visits to regular public schools to observe their special education programming. In particular, they visited self-contained and resource room programs for students with significant cognitive and/or physical disabilities. Was it my study that prompted these actions? Regardless of the answer to the question, I am hopeful that my research at Montessori Village will enhance and expand programs for SWDs.

Implications for charter school *and* regular public school practice. Charter schools and regular public schools alike could learn from my findings at Montessori Village. Some of the parents and students that I interviewed enrolled at the school because they were dissatisfied with

the regular public school setting. But rather than specific dissatisfaction with the special education services, it seemed more related to how they were treated with regard to communication and feeling that their concerns were being addressed. In contrast, their satisfaction at Montessori Village seemed to be all about the relationships the students and families had established with school staff. The school staff seemed keenly aware that these relationships provided students and parents with a sense of belonging at the school. Parents reported that this was a huge draw for them. Further, the Montessori philosophy of movement, self-paced learning, and experimentation with manipulatives to enhance a child's learning also were a big draw for parents. In interviews and informal conversations with staff members, it was found that many parents and students who came to the school were turned off by the rigidity of the grade level curriculum offered by regular public schools. In her interview, Erica, a teacher at Montessori Village, stated that the type of families who are drawn to the school are the ones who are "kind of done with" the rigidity of the regular public school setting.

Implications for public schools, both regular and charter, based on my study are not overly complex, or difficult to employ by school staff. I believe that any efforts that schools make to enhance communication with parents, whether they are the parents of a SWD or not, will go a long way in improving educational outcomes for students. With SWDs in particular, when school staff members take the time to explain the special education processes and services, they are more likely to get buy-in from parents and establish a true partnership that is of benefit to the student. Also, making reasonable accommodations for all students, such as movement in the classroom and allowing students to work at their own pace seemed to be attractive components to those who chose Montessori Village.

Implications for parents of SWDs. Several components of my study could be helpful to parents who are considering a charter school for their child who has a disability. First, my explanation of important IDEA provisions may be helpful to them in examining whether or not a charter school is meeting the expectations of federal law. Second, my study may assist a parent in asking important questions about the special education supports and services at a charter school, such as: Who's is responsible for developing my child's IEP?; What sort of input will I have into my child's special education program?; or, Where will my child receive his/her special education services and what will they be? My study may also help parents to understand that the mission and curriculum of a charter school may make services to SWDs an uncomfortable fit.

Communication seemed to be a major part of the satisfaction expressed by the parents and students who I spoke with at Montessori Village. The era of accountability has placed increasingly heavy demands on public education to have all students, including those with disabilities, achieving at very high levels. I fear that with the raised expectations, some of the human elements that make American public education unique have been lost. Good communication, transparency, keeping the student as the focus, and some flexibility in programming seems to be a lubricant of sorts to keep things running smoothly between parents and schools. This certainly seemed to be the case at Montessori Village.

Implications for further study. My study illuminates several areas for further research. A major finding at Montessori Village was that they were not yet equipped to meet the needs of students with significant disabilities. It would be interesting to engage in another case study of a charter school that had established a program for a student or group of students, who needed extensive special education support. Other schools may benefit from such a study if they chose to proactively engage in preparing to meet the needs of *all* SWDs who may enroll in their school. A

second area for further study may include what factors the parents of SWDs consider when looking into joining a charter school community. First and foremost, what factors led them to seek out a charter school for their child's education in the first place? How does the school's marketing of themselves impact the parents' decision to enroll? Does such marketing create a *soft* counseling out effect for parents of SWDs? What information do parents of SWDs feel they need to know to make informed choices with regard to enrolling in a charter school? Also, does a family's socio-economic status (SES) make them more or less likely to seek enrollment in a charter school?

It would also be interesting to engage in another case study where a charter school's curricular focus would not be perceived as inviting to SWDs. Designing a study to reveal school stakeholder's perceptions of special education services in a charter school for high ability students might yield different results than the study in which I engaged. A charter school designed for gifted and/or talented students may not be prepared for SWDs that may need supports and specialized instruction to grasp the school's curriculum. A natural extension of such as study would be research about which type of charter schools, in general, better align with serving SWDs and which ones don't. Finally, a very interesting study would entail interviewing parents of students with severe cognitive and/or physical disabilities that decided not to enroll in a charter school. What was the reason for their decision? How were they treated by charter school personnel? Did the level of special education supports available at the school have an impact on their decision to not enroll?

Further research in the areas described above may improve access to charter schools for SWDs, which was a major impetus for my engagement in this study. If school choice initiatives

in general, including charter schools, are a viable way to improve public education in America, SWDs deserve to benefit from these improvements.

Appendix A: Interview Protocols

Interview Guide: Parent

<u>In what ways do the school's mission, curricular design, and organizational structure enhance or inhibit efforts to meet the needs of SWDs?</u>

1.) What specific curricular offerings, or instructional style drew your family to this school?

- What makes this place different from other public schools, charter or traditional?

2.) How would you describe the school's mission?

- How is it organized to meet its specific mission?
- In what way does the mission or curricular design inhibit meeting the needs of your child? How does it promote meeting their needs?

3.) How would you describe the school's staff?

- What makes them a good fit for this school and its specific mission?

4.) How much emphasis is placed on your child performing well on ISTEP or ECAs?

- Do you feel that the school's mission and curricular design promote high levels of achievement on these test scores? In what ways?

5.) How much emphasis is placed on meeting the individual needs of all learners in this school?

- Do you feel that your school's mission and curricular design promote such an emphasis? How?

<u>What are the perceptions of charter school administrators, staff, parents and students regarding their school's legal obligations and subsequent policies/procedures for serving SWDs?</u>

1.) What is your child's disability category for special education?

- What was the process for identification for services? What was your role in that process?
- What sort of assistance was your child given prior to the formal evaluation for services?
- What information was used to make the decision to evaluate your child for services?

2.) Does your child receive any related services, such as OT/PT? Counseling? If so, who provides those services?

3.) Who has the primary responsibility for the development student IEPs in your school?

- What training in special education do he/she/they have?

5.) Do you feel as though this individual or group of individuals is readily available to discuss the student's plan or to provide guidance to you?

6.) Besides you, who attends the case conferences for your child?

- What is your role in the conference?
- How familiar do you feel your child's teacher(s) are with the contents his/her IEP?

7.) How would you describe the specialized instruction offered to your child? How is it different?

- Do you feel that it is adequate in most cases? Why or why not?
- Where does this specialized instruction occur?

8.) What role does your child play in developing his/her IEP? What role do you play?

10.) What happens if you are not satisfied with your child's services here?

What training, resources, and expertise do the study participants perceive as needed to effectively serve students with special needs in the charter school setting?

1.) What training do you feel that you or the staff needs to better meet the needs of students with disabilities in your school? Elaborate...

2.) Is there training provided on a regular basis for parents that is specific to special education/services? Explain…

- Who provides the training?
- How often does the training occur?
- What trainings have been helpful to you?

Interview Guide: Students

1.) What are the perceptions of charter school administrators, staff, parents and students regarding their school's legal obligations and subsequent policies/procedures for serving SWDs?

- What could you tell me about your special education intervention and services here at the school? (Are the students served mainly in the regular classroom setting with supports, offered resource room assistance, self-contained model, or some combination of these models?)
- Who has the primary responsibility for meeting the requirements of your IEP or 504 plan? (Do you feel as though this individual or group of individuals is readily available to discuss your plan or to provide specialized instruction as outlined in the plan?)
- How would you describe the specialized instruction offered to you as per your IEP? (Do you feel that it is adequate in most cases? Why or why not? For the most part, where does this specialized instruction occur?)
- What role do you plan in the development and implementation of your IEP or 504 plan? (Are there written policies in place for communication and discussion of the plan? If so, what are they and where can they be found?)

2.) In what ways do the school's mission, curricular design, and organizational structure enhance or inhibit efforts to meet the needs of SWDs?

- What specific curricular offerings or instructional style of this school appealed to you? What makes this place different from other public schools, charter or traditional?
- How would you describe the school's organizational structure as it relates to meeting the school's specific mission?
- How would you describe the school staff? What makes them a good fit for this school and its specific mission?
- Have you struggled academically or behaviorally while in attendance? What steps were taken to assist you?
- Are there supports in place to meet your needs?
- What are your biggest concerns regarding your attendance at this school with regard to having your educational needs met?

3.) What training, resources, and expertise do the study participants perceive as needed to effectively serve students with special needs in the charter school setting?

- What sorts of training do you feel the school staff needs to improve services to students with disabilities at the school? Are you aware of any training that the staff has had to improve services to those with disabilities?

Interview Guide: School Personnel

<u>In what ways do the school's mission, curricular design, and organizational structure enhance or inhibit efforts to meet the needs of SWDs?</u>

1.) What specific curricular offerings, or instructional style draws families to your school?

- What makes this place different from other public schools, charter or traditional?

2.) How would you describe your school's mission?

- In what ways is your school organized to meet its specific mission?
- In what way does the mission or curricular design inhibit meeting the needs of SWDs? How does it promote meeting their needs?

3.) How would you describe the people you work with?

- What makes them a good fit for this school and its specific mission?

4.) Are there supports in place to meet the needs of any child with a disability in this school? Describe or elaborate...

- What happens when a student that needs extensive levels of support wants to enroll here?

5.) How much emphasis is placed on ISTEP and ECA scores at your school?

- What consequences concern you regarding performance on ISTEP and ECAs?
- Do you feel that your school's mission and curricular design promote high levels of achievement on these test scores? In what ways?

6.) How much emphasis is placed on meeting the individual needs of all learners in your school?

- Do you feel that your school's mission and curricular design promote such an emphasis? How?

What are the perceptions of charter school administrators, staff, parents and students regarding their school's legal obligations and subsequent policies/procedures for serving SWDs?

1.) How are students referred for special education testing here? (Process)

- Explain the pre-referral intervention process.
- Who ultimately makes the decision to refer for testing/evaluation?
- What information is used to make that decision?
- Are your evaluations done by school staff or contracted out?

2.) Can you tell me about the continuum of placements that are offered to students who have an IEP? (Are the students served mainly in the regular classroom setting with supports, offered resource room assistance, self-contained model, or some combination of these models?)

- Are speech/language services offered to students with communication disorders?
- What related services are offered to students with an IEP? (OT/PT/transportation, etc.)
- Who provides these services?

3.) Who has the primary responsibility for the development student IEPs in your school?

- What training in special education does he/she/they have?

4.) Do you have students here that are served through a Section 504 plan? Can you give examples of some of the plans?

- Who is the school's Section 504 coordinator? What are their responsibilities?

5.) Do you feel as though this individual or group of individuals is readily available to discuss the student's plan or to provide guidance to you?

6.) Do you attend the case conferences for your students?

- What is your role in the conference?
- When a teacher has a SWD in their classroom, how familiar do you feel they are with the contents of the student's IEP/504 plan?

7.) How would you describe the specialized instruction offered to students with IEPs? How is it different from the instruction general education students get?

- Do you feel that it is adequate in most cases? Why or why not?
- For the most part, where does this specialized instruction occur?

8.) What role do the students and parents play in developing a student's IEP? What about parents?

- What role do students/parents play in developing a section 504 plan?

9.) What is your understanding of the disciplinary procedures for students with disabilities?

10.) What happens if a parent is dissatisfied with special education or 504 services/accommodations here? Do you have examples?

What training, resources, and expertise do the study participants perceive as needed to effectively serve students with special needs in the charter school setting?

1.) What training do you feel that you or the staff needs to better meet the needs of students with disabilities in your school? Elaborate...

2.) Is there training provided on a regular basis that is specific to serving students with IEPs? Section 504 plans?

- Who provides the training?
- How often does the training occur?
- What trainings have been helpful to you?

Appendix B:

Person Completing the Form: ____Building Administrator ____ Co-op Administrator ____ Other: _____

Name of Employee being observed: _____ Observer: _____

School/Corporation:_____ _____ Date: _____ Time:_____

The following checklist may be used during an observation of an employee during a case conference:

Is this an initial conference? ___Yes ___No

Is the employee chairing the conference? ___Yes ___No

What other role is the employee performing (TOR, Evaluator, TOS, etc.): _____

NOTE: Highlighted areas are responsibilities of case conference chairperson.

	Expectations	Yes	No	Not Observed	Not Applicable
1	Introductions were made.				
2	Purpose of the meeting was shared.				
3	An agenda was reviewed.				
4	Parents rights were offered/reviewed.				
5	Present levels were shared.				
6	Parent input was encouraged.				
7	Parent concerns were discussed and addressed.				
8	Suggested goals were appropriate for student.				
9	Recommended services were appropriate for student's needs and abilities.				
10	Written notes were taken and accurately reflect conversation during case conference.				
11	Case conference was run efficiently, closely following the agenda.				
12	Information/data was presented succinctly and clearly.				
13	Actively participated in the case conference.				
14	Shared accurate information.				
15	Diffused contentious situations.				
16	Checked for understanding of all ccc members.				
17	Checked that all appropriate members were present or excusals were completed.				
18	All appropriate forms/signatures obtained.				
19	Follow up duties were clarified (Rights were reviewed accurately in understandable terms).				

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July 2005 - July 2014 (9 years 1 month)
District level oversight of special education programs, high ability programs, ELL programs, alternative school program that involved collaboration with teachers, school and district level administrators, and community service organizations.
Special Education Teacher at South Harrison Community School Corporation
January 1988 - July 2005 (17 years 7 months)
Provided inclusive and resource room instruction to students with emotional disabilities and behavioral problems.

Skills & Expertise

Curriculum Development
Program Evaluation
Special Education
Teacher Training
Educational Leadership
Staff Development
Community Outreach
Teaching
Customer Service
Public Relations
Public Speaking
Supervisory Skills
Program Development
Educational Technology
Instructional Design

Education

Indiana University Bloomington
Ed.D (May, 2017) Educational Leadership and Administration, General, 2011 - 2017
Grade: 3.94 GPA
Indiana University Bloomington

Ed.S., Educational Leadership and Administration, 2011 - 2015
Grade: 3.94
University of Louisville
Certification for Director of Exceptional Needs, Educational Leadership and Administration, Special Education, 2006 - 2008
Grade: 3.96
Indiana University-Southeast
Master of Arts (M.A.), Education, 1988 - 1992
Grade: 3.5
Lamar University
Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), Social Work, 1983 - 1987
Grade: 3.0

Certifications

Indiana Teacher's License: Special Education, Emotional Disability
Indiana Department of Education
Director of Exceptional Learners
Indiana department of education May 2004

Publications

Autism charter schools: Legally vulnerable or viable?
Indiana Journal of Law and Social Equality May 8, 2015
Authors: Janet R. Decker, Keshia Seitz, Bruce Kulwicki